The Secular Movement in the Philippines

Atheism and Activism in a Catholic Country

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In memory of my mother,
Angela Blechschmidt
(1960-2015).

And for my father,
Reiner Blechschmidt,
who kept his promise to stay at her side
during the good times and the worst.

Contents

Acknowledgments

As can be said for any research project based on ethnographic fieldwork, the following study on the secular movement in the Philippines would not have been possible without those people who accepted and welcomed me as a foreign researcher among themselves — or at least tolerated my presence and my questions. Thus, first and foremost I want to thank all the activists and members of the *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF) and the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS) — as well as members and former members of the other like-minded local groups including the *University of the Philippines Atheist Circle* (UPaC), the *Tiger Freethinkers* at the University of Santo Tomas, and the *Humanist Alliance Philippines, International* (HAPI) —, whom I have met during my stay in Manila and who readily shared their stories, thoughts and views with me in numerous informal contexts, and/or even agreed to be interviewed and recorded in a more formal setting. Further, special thanks are due to the atheists and freethinkers who have provided me with leaflets, newsletters, pamphlets and other stuff produced by some of the previously existing secularist groups. They thereby greatly helped me to (re-)construct a local history of atheist activism.

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"Why does it take so long to write a book?" Christina, my sister, asked me this question already about one and a half years after I had started my PhD project. And while in the end it took (just!) a little longer to finish "my book," she has remained supportive about it ever since. I'm not only grateful for her uplifting words, particularly during the final stages of writing up, but also for giving birth to her two wonderful daughters, Ronja and Mia. Both of them have brought joy to our entire family, especially at a time when we needed it the most.

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final months, weeks, and days — even at the expense of his own health —, I am more than grateful.

My mother, who became severely ill during my stay in the Philippines and eventually passed away shortly after her 55th birthday in fall 2015, has always been very proud about her son pursuing a PhD. And while I am, of course, more than happy about having finally finished the latter, I am at the same time deeply sad about not being able to share that moment with her.

This book is dedicated to the memory of her. *Wir vermissen Dich sehr*.

List of Figures

All the photos were taken by the author, unless otherwise stated.

List of Abbreviations

AAI — Atheist Alliance International

AHA — American Humanist Association

BATAS — *Bahaghari* Atheists and Agnostics Society, the LGBT subgroup of PATAS

BHA — British Humanist Association

BRS — Bertrand Russell Society

BRS-PH — Bertrand Russell Society Philippines

CBCP — Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

CCP — Cultural Center of the Philippines

CFI — Center for Inquiry

CFI-PH — Center for Inquiry Philippines

CTF — Critical Thinking Filipinos

DLSU — De La Salle University

EDSA — Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a major highway going through parts of Metro Manila

ELMS — Enlightenment League and Moral Society

FF — Filipino Freethinkers

FF MMS — Filipino Freethinkers Metro Manila South

FFRF — Freedom From Religion Foundation

HAPI — Humanist Alliance Philippines, International

HVD — German Humanist Association

IHEU — International Humanist and Ethical Union

IHEYO — International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization

ISHV — Institute for Science and Humanist Values

LGBT — Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender

PAS — Islamic Party of Malaysia

PATAS — Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society

PATAS HQ — PATAS headquarters, located in Quezon City

PDI — Philippine Daily Inquirer, a well-known English-speaking newspaper in the Philippines

PSRH — Philippine Society of Rational Humanists

RDFRS — Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science

RH — Reproductive Health

RHAN — Reproductive Health Advocacy Network

SEC — Security and Exchange Commission (Philippines)

TF — Tiger Freethinkers

UP — University of the Philippines

UPaC — University of the Philippines Atheist Circle

UPLB — University of the Philippine - Los Baños

UST — University of Santo Tomas

Introduction

December 7, 2013. I am attending my very first LGBT Pride March, which takes place in Metro Manila, the crowded and vibrant capital city of the Philippines. Both organizations, the "Filipino Freethinkers," or "FF," and the "Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society," or "PATAS," on which I am conducting my research, have been actively participating in the Pride March for several years. FF, PATAS, and all the other participating groups are arranged in alphabetical order according to their official names. During the march, I am thus constantly running back and forth to take photos of both FF and PATAS and to talk to their respective members. Several times, both FF and PATAS pass some of the religious protesters standing at the side of the street holding up their signs: "It's not ok to be gay, it's a sin!" "Gay marriage is NO marriage at all in the eyes of GOD" etc. At one point, the FF crowd walks by and one of the group's core members calls upon the others: "Let's open their hearts!" Everyone in the group starts to sing a song they seem to have agreed upon beforehand. Later on and in sharp contrast, some members of the other group, PATAS, pass by those anti-gay protesters, and they start to shout loudly Nietzsche's famous proclamation: "God is dead!"

Figure 1: Members of the *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF) at the Manila Pride March in December 2013.

Figure 2: Members of the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS) at the Manila Pride March in December 2013.

Contemporary forms of organized secularism in the Philippines

Running around on smoggy streets with 36 degrees and more than 90% humidity might not have been the most pleasant part of my research on that day. As described in this short ethnographic vignette from my fieldwork, however, it allowed me to observe something very telling about FF and PATAS: both groups share certain things, e.g. their strong support and activism for LGBT rights, as well as differ in important ways, such as in their particular approach towards their religious opponents. These two contemporary forms of organized secularism in the Philippines, their similarities and differences are the subject of this thesis. As organizations for atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secular humanists, and other nonbelievers, they provide their members — who often feel marginalized, sometimes even discriminated in a country commonly regarded as strongly dominated by religion, especially Catholicism — a community of "like-minded" people. They further constitute a platform for nonbelievers and secular activists to enter the public sphere on the ground of their identity as such, and to push collectively for political goals, in particular for "secularism," which is understood as the institutional separation of religion and politics. While the latter is, in fact, firmly established in the Philippine constitution, its de facto realization has been frequently put under question. The strong, almost "hegemonic" position of the Catholic Church and its influence on political affairs are repeatedly pointed out in this regard — not only by activists, but by scholars, journalists, and other observers as well.

It may not come as a surprise then, that it is the dominance of Catholicism and the Catholic Church that represents the main target of the criticism articulated by secularist groups such as FF and PATAS. However, as my observation at the Manila Pride March indicates, the way in which each group's criticism becomes manifest is not always identical. With regard to their respective official positioning it is, in fact, based on slightly different grounds: FF — composed not only of "non-believers" but also of "progressive believers" as stated on their website — criticizes the Church mainly as a hierarchical institution deemed as "dogmatic" and as constantly violating secular principles. In contrast to FF, PATAS is more explicitly focused on promoting atheism among Philippine society and also more exclusive with regard to its membership. As the organization's "membership qualifications" underscore, to become a member an individual must identify "as either an atheist or an agnostic" and support the group's

vision and mission in order to qualify. Thus, PATAS as an atheist organization can and does attack the Catholic Church more fundamentally compared to FF. To them the Church is only the main institutional representation of what they see as the underlying problem as such: religion.

Members of both groups themselves draw on this discursive distinction of FF being more focused on the issues of "secularism," while the focus of PATAS lies more explicitly on "atheism." However, there are many other aspects that both groups have in common. In fact, they are linked quite closely to each other, and actively collaborate on certain occasions — e.g. on larger conventions. Several of the secular activists in Manila were, or are members of both groups and/or follow their respective activities. And, as shown by their official websites, Facebook presence, forums, and YouTube videos, for both FF and PATAS digital channels have always been of great importance. It is mostly through them that activities are coordinated and announced, and that current events are shared, discussed, or commented on. Both groups further organize so-called "meetups," where members regularly meet face-to-face in order to discuss philosophical, ethical and political topics, scientific discoveries, and current events in a more or less formalized way.

It was this kind of meetup that brought FF into its very existence: the group was officially founded on February 1st in 2009 when 26 individuals came together at Starbucks in Shangri-La mall in Ortigas, a famous business district in the eastern part of Metro Manila, to meet and talk with like-minded people, whom they had only become acquainted with from online discussions on several atheist mailing lists. Red Tani, who initiated this very first meetup in order to encourage more such "offline" interactions among members of these digital platforms, is still the president and uncontested leader of what now has become, in their own words, "the largest and most active organization for freethought in the Philippines" (FF n.d.-a). While the meetups have always formed the basis, FF later also became more and more engaged in socio-political activism, promoting, for example, human rights, particularly LGBT and reproductive health rights. Further, the group's members organize various other events based on FF's official slogan "Reason, Science, and Secularism," or "RSS."

About two years after FF's foundation, the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS) was established in February 2011 — as an "offshoot" organization of FF, as

some local activists see it. As indicated by my introductory vignette, PATAS too, strongly supports the LGBT rights movement. Aside from the regular participation at the march, the group's LGBT wing even formed its own subgroup called *Bahaghari*[1] *Atheists and Agnostics Society* (BATAS) and organized several events under that name. More recently, PATAS has been focusing increasingly on humanitarian activities in order to counter perceived public stereotypes about the alleged immorality of nonbelievers. Its most ambitious project related to that was certainly the so-called "Free Medical Clinic," which the group had organized several times in 2014 in poor neighborhoods around Metro Manila. Similar to FF, the promotion of "science," and, of course, but to a lesser extent, "secularism" constitute another building block of PATAS' agenda.

Urban ethnographic fieldwork, central research questions and conceptual considerations

This thesis is based on ethnographic research in the Philippines, mainly in Metro(politan) Manila, which is located on the northern island of Luzon and considered not only the country's political capital, but its cultural, educational, and economical center as well. Also known as the National Capital Region (NCR), Metro Manila is comprised of 16 cities and one municipality. It is not only home to almost 13 million people, but also to numerous governmental agencies and NGOs, universities, luxurious shopping malls, Philippine companies and local branches of international enterprises, hotel chains and banks — the latter often spread within so-called Central Business Districts (CBD) such as Makati or Bonifacio Global City. In immediate vicinity to these more affluent areas one finds squatter settlements and slums populated by the lower socio-economic strata and the so-called urban poor (cf. Reckordt 2012; Woods 2006, 143-48).

[1] "Bahaghari" means "rainbow" and is supposed here to refer to the various colors and shades that sexuality can take. See also chapter 3.

Figure 3: Map of the Philippines.

Figure 4: Metro Manila.

I stayed from August 2013 to May 2014 as an affiliated guest on the Diliman campus of the renown secular state university, the *University of the Philippines* (UP), located in Quezon City, one of the northern parts of the metropolis. These ten months of urban fieldwork were preluded by a pre-study in April 2013, and a short trip to Cebu City in June 2013 to participate at the *Asia Humanism Conference,* which PATAS had organized together with the youth wing of the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU) (see chapter 5). At the beginning of 2016 I returned to Manila for a couple of weeks to conduct a small re-study.

During the period of my research I attended the regular meetups and post-meetup gatherings of FF and PATAS, as well as a few meetings of other like-minded organizations, such as the Tiger Freethinkers or HAPI, which I will introduce in chapter 2. Aside from participating in the meetups, I went to numerous other events organized by the different organizations, e.g. humanitarian activities, internal meetings of core members, a podcast production, religious debates in Rizal Park, and some celebrations, such as the "End of the Year" party of PATAS. Outside these organizational activities I

sometimes met a few members of FF and PATAS, for example, for having dinner and drinks. I further conducted 42 semi-structured and tape-recorded interviews in 2013, 2014, and 2016 with secularists and nonbelievers located in and around Manila, including some former atheist activists, e.g. members of the UP Atheist Circle, which had existed only until the early 2000s.

Aside from a general interest in the history of the local secular movement, and the individual trajectories of its representatives within the particular cultural context of the Philippines, the major focus of my research was on the *collective* identities and practices of FF and PATAS as atheist and secularist groups in Manila, the discursive dynamics inside and between them, as well as the transnational dimensions of their atheism and activism. More specifically, I asked the following questions:

How do they differ in their respective position towards the religious context of the Philippines, in which both are situated, and relate to? How do they position themselves vis-a-vis each other? In what way are FF and PATAS embedded in larger networks of secular activists around the globe? How do members of FF and PATAS appropriate the discourses surrounding the transnational secular movement? How are the related dynamics, tensions, and debates of this movement reflected, or played out in the local context of the Philippines? And, last but not least, in what way might we get some new perspectives on changes in the Philippine's religious context by looking at the specific discourses and activism of secularists and nonbelievers?

In approaching these specific issues I am able to draw on, as well as contribute to a still small, but steadily growing body of social scientific literature that analyzes individual atheist, humanist, and freethinking organizations around the world, their respective membership — so-called "active atheists" (LeDrew 2013, 434-35) —, as well as those transnational dimensions of what is commonly referred to as the contemporary secular, or secularist movement (see, for example, Eller 2015, 273). That one can, indeed, speak of a "movement" in this regard, has been convincingly shown by various scholars who approach their object of research as such, and analyze it by drawing, for example, explicitly on current social movement theories (Cimino and Smith 2014; LeDrew 2016; Mastiaux 2013; Meagher 2018). The discursive, and often institutional links transcending national and regional boundaries have been pointed out in several recent

studies focusing in particular on the media-driven phenomenon called the "new atheism," whose main representatives (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens), their writings (in numerous translated versions) and the related multimedia activities have been circulating worldwide for many years.[2] They have been appropriated and articulated, for example, in the local discourses of secular activists in diverse countries such as the US and UK (Cimino and Smith 2010; LeDrew 2016), Germany (Zenk 2012), France[3], Sweden (Kind, personal communication)[4], India (Quack 2012a), or, as I will show in more detail in chapter 5, also the Philippines.

The secular movement as such, however, has to be conceived of as a "diffuse movement" (Cimino and Smith 2014, 3), or a rather "loosely-knit network" (LeDrew 2013a, 15), comprised of a whole range of differently labeled groups and individuals, e.g. atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, (secular) humanists, rationalists, skeptics, infidels, nonbelievers, nones, secularists, brights etc. (cf. Spencer 2014, xviii). "Behind each self-identification," as Cimino and Smith remind us, "are different and even clashing histories, traditions, and ways of being an atheist" (2014, 6).[5] That those various terms are attached with different meanings and positions towards religion will also become apparent in my analysis of FF and PATAS. As indicated in my introductory remarks, the two groups' differing collective relations towards religious actors become manifest already in their respective official names. Still, as the comparison will also show, both groups can clearly be considered as part of the same movement. Thus, in the words of LeDrew, "analyzing the movement is necessarily a process of analyzing a number of ideological and organizational vectors in states of tension that intersect in some general points of common concern — namely, opposition to religious influence in public life" (2016, 109).

[2] McAnulla, Kettel, and Schulzke (2018), as well as two recent edited scholarly volumes focus specifically on the "new atheism": Amarasingam (2010) and Cotter, Quadrio, and Tuckett (2017a). See also chapter 5.
[3] The popular and controversially discussed French philosopher Michel Onfray and his work, in particular his "The Atheist Manifesto" (2007) are considered as one of the "non-Anglophone expressions of 'New Atheism'" or "a particularly French 'New Atheism'" (Cotter, Quadrio, and Tuckett 2017b, 8; cf. Trompf 2017).
[4] Susanne Kind was my colleague in the research team on "The Diversity of Nonreligion." In her PhD project similar to my own she analyzes the biggest humanist organization in Sweden, *Humanisterna*.
[5] Although some people and groups subsumed under the above-mentioned labels would probably object to their positions and views being described as "ways of being an atheist." But that just underlines the point being made here.

Studying the secular movement: some terminological issues

The large variety of labels and identifications used within the discourses of the secular movement (and among non-affiliated nonbelievers as well) is mirrored in the scholarly discourses trying to describe and understand them. While, for example, "atheism," probably the most common and publicly known term of the above-mentioned ones, might simply be defined as nonbelief in God,[6] Tomlins and Beaman remind us that "there are multiple ways atheism can be described to reflect various ways of not believing in a god, such as explicit atheism, implicit atheism, negative atheism, positive atheism, practical atheism, pragmatic atheism, strong atheism, weak atheism, and so on" (2015, 2). Then there is the above mentioned "new" atheism, "militant" atheism, "scientific" atheism etc. That is why some scholars — including Tomlins and Beaman themselves — prefer to speak of "atheism" in the plural: atheism*s*. In his "Atheists: The Origin of the Species," Nick Spencer, even talks about "a family of atheisms" (2014, xviii) in this regard. Further, the question whether it is useful and/or appropriate at all to speak of "atheism" in other than Christian contexts has likewise been subject to constant debate. This becomes manifest, for instance, in the definition of "positive" atheism that Tomlins and Beaman agreed upon for their edited volume: "we define atheism as *the belief* that there is no God, no gods, no Goddess, and no goddesses" (4; original italics). On the other hand, "the negative atheism position," as they remark, "can be difficult to distinguish from agnosticism" (4). The meaning of the latter term, however, has likewise been subject to debate. In fact, in the popular book series "Very Short Introductions" published by Oxford University Press "agnosticism" even received its own separate volume (Le Poidevin 2010), thereby complementing the already existing one on "atheism" (Baggini 2003). In 2011 the two books were completed by a third one about "humanism" (Law 2011).

These short remarks indicate some of the terminological issues at hand when approaching the research subject of this thesis, i.e. organized nonbelievers in the Philippines. Scholars working on similar groups in other contexts have called their objects of research, for example, "freethought societies," "freethought movement,"

[6] For definitions and an overview on "atheism," see, for example, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* edited by Michael Martin (2007), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (2013), and the Oxford online dictionary *A Dictionary of Atheism* edited by Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee (2016).

"organized atheism," "atheist movement," "organized humanism," "organized irreligion," "organized rationalism," "secularist movement" and "organized secularism" (cf. Campbell 1971; Cimino and Smith 2014; Engelke 2014; LeDrew 2016; Quack 2012a, b; Royle 1974, 1980) — sometimes interchangeably. Accordingly, I could speak of "organized freethought" and "organized atheism" when referring to FF and PATAS, respectively. Following Cragun and Manning (2017), however, I use the term "organized secularism" throughout this thesis to describe both organizations. I have chosen this term not only because talking about the "secular movement" has become quite common within the scholarly circles working on those groups, but also — because of its explicit reference to "secularism" as the ideology of a strict separation between religious and political spheres within society — it can also be understood as a kind of umbrella term. Their support — albeit to a different degree, on different levels, and through different activities — of such a "political secularism" (cf. Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016: 23) is what unites FF and PATAS — as well as all the other like-minded groups in Manila, some of which I also have done research on and which I will introduce in chapter 2. Situated in a country where religious groups, and in particular the Catholic Church and its public organ, the *Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines* (CBCP), are regarded as constantly challenging the constitutional church-state separation, the specific focus of FF, PATAS, and similar organizations in this regard becomes easily comprehensible. Thus, to adequately understand the profiles and characteristics of these groups one has to look at the particular religious and cultural context, which they *relate* to in their discourses and practices.

The relational dimension of organized secularism

Such a "relational" dimension or local embeddedness of organized secularism was pointed out already in one of the first systematic social scientific studies about the topic. In his groundbreaking "Toward a Sociology of Irreligion," published in 1971, British sociologist Colin Campbell attempted to establish what he called "irreligion" as a valid, independent research subject in its own right, specifically within the sociology of religion. He presented a conceptual framework for researching "irreligious" phenomena, which he defined as "those beliefs and actions which are expressive of attitudes of hostility or indifference toward the prevailing religion, together with

indications of the rejection of its demands" (Campbell 1971, 21). Based on sociological observations and historical sources, he analyzed and described the secularist movements of the 19th and 20th century in Great Britain and the United States. This focus on "specifically irreligious social movements," as he referred to them, i.e. "social movements in which the associated ideology is essentially irreligious" (2-3), compared to other ideologies containing only irreligious "elements," like, for example, Communism or Socialism, makes his study particularly relevant to my own work in various regards. One of the most important aspects of "irreligion" that Campbell set out to conceptualize, however, and which later scholars drew on is his "careful anti-essentialist epistemology" (Lee 2013, XXI). As he strongly emphasized, "[…] irreligion cannot be defined substantively in terms of identifiable beliefs and practices but only as a general form of response to religion, the content of the irreligious response itself varying as the content of religion varies" (Campbell 1971, 21). Campbell outlined some varieties of the form the "irreligious response" might take, e.g. "a-religious" or "anti-religious." However, what is crucial about his remark here is that "irreligion" is not only strongly related to the local religious context, but that as such it is also culturally and historically contingent. As Campbell pointed out, describing the religious landscape of the respective local setting, in which the "irreligious" phenomenon of interest is situated, might be easier "where societies possess one single dominant and coherent religion, for in such situations irreligion must necessarily take the form of resentment against that tradition" (1971, 29). In the Philippines, as mentioned above and as I will describe in more detail in the next chapter, such a "single dominant and coherent religion" is, indeed, not hard to identify.

Campbell's overall approach has been criticized, refined and developed further by later scholars. Its relational dimension, however, still remains central, albeit in a slightly different, and more fundamental way. In her influential terminological discussion, Lois Lee (2012), for example, tried to clarify the often confusing and inconsistent use of central concepts like "atheism," "secularity," and "non-religion," by disentangling these terms explicitly from each other and distinguishing them more precisely. Arguing for the latter to be established as the master concept for the field of "non-religion studies," she defined it as follows: "Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion" (Lee 2012, 131; italics in the original). In her "Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular" published in 2015, Lee

developed her thoughts on the terminology further (see Lee 2015, chapter 1).

Johannes Quack, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork on organized atheism in India (2012a, b), presented a similar conceptual framework, specifically inspired, however, by Pierre Bourdieu and sociological field theories. In his "Outline of a Relational Approach to Nonreligion" (Quack 2014) he depicted "nonreligious" phenomena as situated in a so-called "religion-related field," surrounding the local "religious field," with which the nonreligious actors, positions, or discourses are connected through "a range of specific relationships" (439). Thus, as Quack states: "'Nonreligion' is not to be understood as something that has a thing-like existence or as something that has clear definitions with primary and secondary features; instead, it should be used to denote the various ways that relationships between a religious field and positions considered to be on the outside are established." (448)

Since I was part of the Emmy Noether research group "The Diversity of Nonreligion" funded by the *German Research Foundation* (DFG) and headed by Johannes Quack at the University of Frankfurt/Main, Germany (2012-2014), and the University of Zurich, Switzerland (2015-2016), my own perspective on organized secularism in the Philippines is deeply inspired by his framework, insofar as I follow the underlying relational, non-essentializing approach, according to which the collective identities of groups like FF and PATAS have to be seen as deeply embedded: in various relations towards the culture-specific religious context, the larger societal, historical, and political situations, to other like-minded groups, as well as the transnational discourses of the secular movement, to the individual trajectories and narratives of their members etc. All of these relations are themselves dynamic, i.e. subject to change, and thus the respective identities of FF and PATAS are potentially and actually shifting as well.

Thus, while I speak of the "secular movement" or "organized secularism" in the Philippines, my study is firmly located in the research field on "nonreligion." Despite its above-mentioned internal heterogeneity — i.e. the various labels used by the different organizations and their members, as well as the numerous meanings attached to them — the former can be demarcated more easily compared to the latter, which comprises a way more broader variety of actors, positions, and debates, including, for example, "religious indifference" (cf. Quack and Schuh 2017). The research on all these phenomena has been steadily growing within recent years, as can be seen, for example, in the large bibliographic list put together by the interdisciplinary and international

Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN). [7]With its conferences and events, its website and blog, its book series "Religion and Its Others" with the publishing house DeGruyter, and its journal *Secularism and Nonreligion*, the NSRN has brought together relevant scholarship, and fostered dialogue and discussion in this field since its establishment in 2008.[8] And, last but not least, the fact that the important debate around core terms such as "nonreligion" or "secularity" themselves is far from being settled, also indicates the current liveliness of this promising, but still emerging field.[9]

What characterizes most of the studies on nonreligion and secularity, however, is a very strong centeredness on Western contexts.[10] With its focus on a Southeast Asian country, my own study thus adds to our understanding of related phenomena in non-Western contexts. In particular with regard to atheist and secularist organizations such a regional broadening seems even more eligible when one considers their aforementioned transnational connectedness. The almost "global" dimension of secular activism, as it becomes manifest, for example, in umbrella organizations such as the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU) is, of course, largely constituted through the possibilities that the new media and its various digital channels provide.

The mediated and virtual dimension of contemporary secular activism

Thus, aside from ethnographic fieldwork in Manila, which included participant observation and semi-structured interviews with secular activists, my research is also based on *online* data, e.g. articles and posts on websites, forums, or blogs, as well as videos and podcasts. As will become clear at different points throughout the entire thesis, the internet with its new forms of interactive media and communication has, in fact, laid the ground for secular organizations in the Philippines to thrive within recent years. In particular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allow FF, PATAS, and the other like-minded local groups of the contemporary secular

[7] See https://nsrn.net/bibliography/.
[8] See https://nsrn.net.
[9] See, for example, Matthew Engelke's critical remarks on an "anthropology of non-religion" (2015). Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale as well critically (albeit only very briefly) discuss the approaches outlined by Lee and Quack, respectively, in their recent book "The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies," in which they emphasize the value of a plurality of approaches towards the relevant empirical phenomena (2016, 27-29).
[10] For a few notable exceptions — aside from Quack's work on India (2012a, b) —, see the annotated bibliography provided by Lee, Bullivant, and Cotter (2013, XLVII).

movement to disseminate their views among a potentially large audience, to attract new members, and to coordinate their activities. In the words of Cimino and Smith, these digital channels clearly "have become an important part of secularist culture and activism" (2014, 93). The "Atheist Awakening" or "Revival of Secularism" that they speak of in their work on secularist organizations in America thus cannot be understood without paying particular attention to the role of the new media for the formation and strengthening of a secular "community." In fact, Cimino and Smith explicitly make use of "media theory" approaches to analyze their object of research. Other scholars of the secular movement such as LeDrew (2016), Meagher (2018), and Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale (2016, 219-21) have strongly emphasized the significance of the new media as well.

The heavy use of new and social media platforms, however, enables FF and PATAS not only to engage with each group's membership and the Philippine public, but also to connect to like-minded organizations worldwide. In fact, both groups have, on different levels, established such connections beyond national boundaries. Further, as I will show in chapter 5, "global" or transnational discourses such as the aforementioned "new atheism" are readily and creatively appropriated by Filipino atheists and secular activists. Their fluency in English, as well as their general "cultural openness" towards the United States, makes it (relatively) easy for members of FF and PATAS to incorporate and/or take part in these discourses.[11]

However, while "resources like the Internet help make this community, and resulting activism, possible," Meagher also reminds us that "technology does not eliminate the divisions that exist within the movement; in fact, it may help highlight some of these differences, as the growing pains of a developing movement become more exposed" (2018, 92). How I approached some of these "divisions," "differences," or "growing pains" in the case of the secular movement in the Philippines, and in particular the way they become manifest in the discourses and practices of FF and PATAS, will be described in the following section.

[11] After Spanish colonial rule over the Philippines was defeated by the US, the country entered its "American period," which lasted from 1899 to official independence in 1946 (interrupted by a three-year Japanese occupation during the Second World War). During that time it was not only Protestantism that was "brought" to the archipelago. In particular, the educational system was rebuilt according to US ideals. Thus, aside from Filipino, English has become and remained ever since an official language in the Philippines.

Shifting identities and strategies of normalizing nonbelief

As Cragun and Manning state in the introduction to their edited volume on secularist organizations in the US (Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017), while there is a great diversity with regard to both the specific aims of, and to the forms that the individual groups and their activities might take, it is one shared goal that unites them all: "the normalizing of nonreligion" (Cragun and Manning 2017, 3). In other words, secularist organizations can be understood as "groups of people who have some sense of togetherness and are organized around their shared desire to be openly and safely secular" (3).[12] The strategies in achieving this goal, the related approaches towards religious actors, and the positioning vis-a-vis the wider public, however, vary and are subject to constant debates and negotiations among members of the numerous atheist and secularist groups.

In order to approach on a more conceptual or analytical level the empirical material about FF and PATAS presented in this thesis I broadly distinguish three such collective (identity) strategies: (1) community-building efforts based mainly on *minority* discourse, (2) a focus on issues of *morality* in order to challenge public stereotypes, and (3) discourse and activities propagating *secularism* as a political philosophy. As Jesse M. Smith has emphasized, "the interplay between atheists seeking both a defined community and a meaningful change in how the public views that community is at the core of their collective identity" (2013, 96). That atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, or any other nonbelievers might feel the need to build up such "a defined community" in the first place, has, of course, to be seen against the background of the respective cultural context, in which they are situated. Similar to the US, nonbelievers in the Philippines constitute a statistical and social minority vis-a-vis a religious majority, and see themselves confronted with discriminatory practices, or subject to public stereotyping and stigmatization. Thus, one central element of secularist groups' strategy in such particular contexts is to actively refer to this minority status, and construct a shared identity around it (cf. Cimino and Smith 2007; Smith 2013). In doing so they explicitly draw on similar minority groups' discourses such as the gay rights movement, which becomes clear, for example, in the slogan of "coming out" (cf. Smith 2011; LeDrew 2013,

[12] Here, the terms "secular" and "nonreligious" are used almost interchangeably. For a differentiation, problematization, and discussion of these and related core terms such as "secularization," "secularity" etc. see, for example, Lee (2015), Quack (2014), or Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale (2016).

2016). Both movements frequently use this motto in order to support and empower their adherents who might be hesitant to "come out of the closet" in fear of social exclusion or discrimination by the religious, or heterosexual majority in their country, respectively.

The second aspect that Smith points out in the quote above, i.e. organized atheists' and secularists' efforts to bring about "a meaningful change in how the public views that community," becomes manifest especially in their discourse and practices around the issue of "morality," which is closely connected to their minority status and discourse. The slogan of "Good without God," and the related humanitarian activities, for example, are deployed by secularist groups worldwide in order to "proof" that one can act "morally" as a nonbeliever, and to deconstruct the corresponding association of religion with morality, which appears to be quite strong in religious-dominated societies such as the Philippines or the US (cf. Smith 2013, 94) In sum, the "development of a minority identity in the United States and elsewhere has been one of the major projects of the secular movement in recent years. Minority discourse in the secular movement is driven by morality and the notion that one can be 'good without God'" (LeDrew 2016, 132).

These two aspects of a collective atheist or secularist identity — building a community of nonbelievers based on their minority status and challenging public perceptions about their ascribed immorality — are complemented by another, third strategy of trying to normalize nonbelief in society. It is the aforementioned propagation of "secularism" as a political ideology, with which secular activists want to stop or reduce the political influence of religion, or prevent the potential — or, de facto — privileging of one particular religion by the state vis-a-vis other religious or nonreligious views. Secularism understood in this, probably most common sense, i.e. as the functional differentiation of religious and political spheres (cf. Cragun and Manning 2017, 2), is supposed to ensure equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation, or non-affiliation.

As I will show in this thesis, both FF and PATAS are — depending on the specific context and its audience — constantly *shifting* between these three different (identity) strategies in their struggle of normalizing nonbelief in a cultural environment that is dominated by religion, and in particular Catholicism. However, aside from this contextual shifting there are also some more broader, long-term *shifts* that I was able to

identify in this regard. In analyzing and trying to understand these more fundamental changes in their collective identity strategies, their general positioning towards religion and their representation vis-a-vis the wider public, I draw on Dominik Müller's work on the youth wing of the *Islamic Party of Malaysia* (PAS). Müller has shown how this political organization recently underwent a "pop-Islamist reinvention" (2014), influenced, on the one hand, by some "internal factors" such as generational changes and related conflicts within the party's leadership. On the other hand, PAS' "cultural transformation" has also to be seen within the context of some "wider societal tendencies," e.g. the "massive rise in the popularity of modern Islamic mass consumption" (2015, 339), and the competitive relationship with other political parties, especially the *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO) with which PAS is engaged in a "pop-cultural competition" (337). Drawing on the work of the political theorists Forst and Günther on "normative orders" (2011), Müller conceptualized the transformative processes of PAS accordingly as a "normative change." Sustained by so-called "justification narratives," which can be disputed and questioned, such "normative orders" are thus themselves "by definition, negotiated and contestable. They can be challenged, changed or even abandoned by reconsidering their underlying justification narratives and establishing alternative counter-narratives" (Müller 2015, 320).

Similar to political parties like PAS, secularist groups and their approach towards religion and their public positioning have to be seen as situated in, and shaped by a whole web of relations to other actors and their respective positions. The aforementioned broader shifts of FF and PATAS between different strategies can thus be conceptualized as such "normative changes," triggered by, as well as embedded in "internal" and "external" factors and relations. The former comprise, for example, certain organizational dynamics such as the specific membership composition — which is, of course, always subject to change —, some influential key figures within the groups and their individual agendas, or general internal restructuring processes. The latter includes not only those relations with the religious field of the Philippines and its main actors, in particular the Catholic Church, but also the connections to other like-minded organizations located both in Manila, or the Philippines, as well as abroad. As I will show in this thesis, while it is especially the relation between FF and PATAS itself, which has to be taken into account when trying to understand their discursive shifts, also the alliances and affiliative links to the transnational secular movement can be quite

influential on a institutional, personnel, and ideological level. Based on my identification of some of these factors and relations for both groups, I will sketch out in more detail in this thesis the broader changes that FF and PATAS have been, or still are going through, respectively.

To adequately understand both groups' larger ideological and strategic discursive shifts, or "normative changes," another conceptual framework — introduced by aforementioned sociologist Stephen LeDrew in his analysis of the contemporary secular movement in North America — is very helpful. Drawing on the work of Alberto Melucci, LeDrew distinguishes between "political" and "cultural" movements. While the former are centered on "instrumental action aimed at the state with the goal of legislative and policy change," the latter "involve constructing and defending shared identities, as well as ideological action aimed at society with the goal of transforming beliefs and values" (LeDrew 2016, 112). The above-mentioned "new atheism," for example, which is the main focus of LeDrew's work, is characterized by its "cultural goal (…) of disseminating the scientific atheist worldview" (116; see also chapter 5). Based on his definition, LeDrew thus argues that this particular ideology or subgroup can largely be regarded a "cultural" movement situated within the broader secular movement, which, on the other hand, has traditionally been a "political" oriented movement with its "political goals of (…) functional differentiation of religious and public spheres, and civil rights for atheists" (116-17). In other words, while the "new atheists" are "more aggressively attacking religion and fighting for cultural transformation," the second of these two "streams," as LeDrew calls them, "seeks to carve out a niche within that culture using instrumental legal-political strategies aimed at protecting civil rights, as well as maintaining established political secularism" (117).

With regard to the three strategies, or elements of the collective identity construction of secularist groups outlined above, one could say that two of them — *minority* discourse, and the focus on *morality* — characterize "cultural" movements, while the third — social activism in support of *secularism* — denotes a "political" movement. Thus, I will describe the aforementioned "normative changes" of FF and PATAS in chapters 4 and 5 according to this distinction[13], respectively. However, these

[13] Recently, Amanda Schutz (2017) gave a helpful overview on the organizational variety of secularist groups located in Houston, Texas, which is based on a similar distinction. Instead of categorizing the groups according to their nonreligious labels such as atheists, humanists, etc., she proposed a typology based on the respective main events that the different organizations provided their members with. Thus,

two "streams," or types of movements are, of course, not to be taken as mutually exclusive, nor as clear-cut, but as helpful analytical models to identify and describe certain dynamics and tensions manifest within the broader secular movement, and also between individual secularist organizations (cf. LeDrew 2016, 117).

Social class and secularist groups' collective agency

Aside from their different and changing relations with religion, which constitute the main element in their respective collective identity as secularist organizations, FF and PATAS members also distinguish these groups from each other by pointing out some factors *beyond* their religion-relatedness. The socio-economic position(ing) of both groups' membership — in other words, their "social class" —, as well as the particular form and the target groups of their activism, are often drawn on in this regard. While such characterizations of FF and PATAS play an important role on a discursive level — since they allow their members to further emphasize each group's own distinctiveness —, they also indicate another central element in the collective identity construction process of such secularist groups, which have to be taken into account when approaching them: the particular form of their collective *agency*.

Inspired by the work of sociologist Rachel Rinaldo on women's rights activists in Indonesia, I will argue that in the different social positions of FF and PATAS different types or "modes of (…) agency and activism" (2013, 23) are entailed. Based on long-term fieldwork among members of four distinct organizations located in the capital Jakarta, Rinaldo shows how the activists in each group draw on the ("global") discourses of Islam and Feminism in very different, creative ways. The specific interpretations and deployments of religious texts, and the resulting forms of agency, are thereby "tied to specific social and organizational *milieus*" (Rinaldo 2013, 25; original emphasis). The different positioning of the four activist groups in what she

she distinguished, for example, organizations that focus on "social" events with the purpose of "socializing with like-minded others" from those who concentrate on "educational" activities for "learning and engaging in structured discussion," and groups who are involved in "political" events to raise "awareness of church/state issues" etc. (Schutz 2017, 120) As she remarked in her conclusion, "like with individuals, organizational identity is not static" (130). The shift of the *Humanists of Houston* (HOH) from a "educational" towards a "communal" organization, is mentioned as an example in this regard. This resembles what I will describe as "normative changes" for FF and PATAS, respectively. My research on organized secularism in the Philippines underlines Schutz's dynamical approach to the various organizational types of secular activists, e.g. by identifying some of the factors that might have played a crucial role in the changing positioning of such groups.

further outlines in her study as the overlapping fields of "Islamic politics" and "Gender politics" shapes their respective capacity for action — i.e. their agency — within the particular religious context of Indonesia. Analogously, the different positioning of FF and PATAS indicated in the "socio-economic mapping"[14] (Wiegele 2005, 85), with which members distinguish both groups from each other beyond their specific relation with religion, correspond to a particular form of agency, which, as I will argue, allows them to pursue their ultimate goal of "normalizing" nonreligion in the Philippines according to their respective collective identity strategy.

Outline of chapters

The thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 1 gives a short contextual overview on the religious landscape of the Philippines, including the controversially discussed relation between the Catholic Church and politics. Against this background, I will give a few examples of the general (negative) perception of atheists and nonbelief in Philippine society, before I present some illustrative quotes from my interviews with nonbelievers about their personal trajectories, about how they deal with their atheist identity in their inner social circles, on how they eventually joined secularist groups such as FF and PATAS, and how they as secular activists see the role of religion in Philippine society, particularly in politics. As will become clear, the different identity strategies of secularist groups outlined above manifest in different ways also in the individual narratives of their members. This chapter thus illustrates what scholars of the secular movement have only recently began to investigate more thoroughly: the relation between *individual* atheist and the related *collective* identity construction processes of secularist groups (LeDrew 2013).

Chapter 2 is about the variety of organized secularism in the Philippines, past and present. In a broad historical sketch I introduce some central figures, who have been participating very actively in the local secular movement in various ways — some even for decades. A few important spaces and places will be described, where the activism of such freethinkers and atheists became manifest, e.g. a small bookshop, a public park,

[14] The notion is taken from Katharine Wiegele's study on *El Shaddai*, where she shows how members of this Charismatic Catholic movement in Manila are often similarly framed and frame themselves in terms of social class (2005, 80ff.).

and some famous universities located in Manila. I will further mention several secularist groups, some of which have disappeared already, while others are still active to some extent. The vast majority of these like-minded organizations are well connected to each other, as well as more or less directly linked to FF and PATAS, the two largest and most prominent secularist groups during the time of my fieldwork.

Chapter 3 gives an overview on the foundational histories, the organizational structures, and the main activities of both FF and PATAS. This background information provides the necessary contextualization for the following four chapters of the thesis, in which I will look more closely at the two groups' discourses, practices, and positioning towards religion, respectively, and carve out some further similarities and differences between them.

In Chapter 4 I focus on FF and the group's position on religion as it becomes manifest in various contexts and on different levels, such as the group's public talk and its more internal discourses. FF's relation towards religion is, as I will discuss, shaped by a certain ambivalence, since the group tries to present itself not as an exclusive atheist organization, though its membership is constituted mainly by such nonbelievers. The collective identity of FF with regard to its religion-relatedness is contested, and subject to change, as I will show in the second part of the chapter. As indicated by the group's strong involvement in public debates around reproductive health policies, FF has undergone a broader shift from a focus on community-building efforts towards social activism under the banner of political "secularism."

In contrast to FF, PATAS' relationship with religion can be regarded as less ambivalent in certain terms since the group's focus lies more explicitly on atheism and the spreading of information about nonbelief in Philippine society. However, as I will show in chapter 5, PATAS' position, its identity strategy, is shifting as well, between a "militant" and a more "tolerant" approach in this regard. This tension is reflected, for example, in the group's members' appropriation of transnational discourses prevalent in the larger secular movement, such as the "new atheism" and "humanism." However, with the above-mentioned "Free Medical Clinic" that PATAS members have organized in 2014 several times under the motto of "Good without God" the group seems to increasingly focus on the latter, which is why I speak of a "humanist turn" of PATAS in the last section of this chapter.

The identity of FF and PATAS as atheist or secularist organizations is largely based

on their position towards religion and the local religious context. Members of both groups, however, frequently articulated further differences *beyond* their respective collective religion-relatedness. These discursive differentiations are the subject of Chapter 6, and as I will show, they are based on what I have introduced above as "socioeconomic mapping" (Wiegele 2005, 85). According to some activists FF's membership represents mainly the well-educated, privileged, and affluent strata of Philippine society — an intellectually-inclined "elite" so to speak — while PATAS is seen as more diverse in this regard, as open to "everyone" and focused on the "grassroots." In reality, this general differentiation might not become manifest in such a clear-cut way. Still, it seems to constitute an important element in the identity construction of both groups vis-a-vis each other. I will contextualize such characterizations by looking at the foundational histories of FF and PATAS, and the initial main target groups of their activities, respectively, and will argue that their different social positions or positioning entail different forms of agency, which correspond to their collective strategies for "normalizing" nonbelief as outlined in the previous chapters.

In the conclusion I will summarize the main arguments of chapters 4 to 6, respectively, which aside from the contextual overviews in chapters 1 to 3 constitute the substantial chapters of this thesis. I thereby discuss how my project contributes to the growing research field about various forms of organized secularism in different cultural contexts, and how it might complement studies on its counterpart, i.e. religion and its contemporary dynamics in the Philippines. Further I will point out some open questions and possibilities for future research in this regard.

Chapter 1

Atheists and Nonbelief in Philippine Society

Researcher: "Generally speaking, when I say 'religion in the Philippines,' what comes to your mind?"

FF member: "Catholicism, obviously…"

FF member: "Uhm, the Catholic Church is the easiest one…"

PATAS member: "Well, the first religion that comes to mind is Catholicism because it's the one that's very active politically in the Philippines…"

FF member: "Catholicism!"

Groups like FF, PATAS, and other like-minded organizations in Manila cannot be adequately understood without looking at the particular shape of the religious context, in which they are situated, and which they relate to. As the above-quoted answers that I got from my interviewees when asked about "religion in the Philippines" illustrate, the country is not only commonly referred to as "very religious," but also as one dominated specifically by Catholicism and the Catholic Church. Further, one of the replies of my interlocutors indicates that the latter's hegemonic position is seen as extending in particular to the political sphere. Most of the secular activists and atheists whom I interviewed — or whom I spoke to in more informal contexts —, however, not only *perceived* and *described* their country in such a way, but they also have *experienced* religion on a very personal, first-hand level. "Growing up Catholic," as they often put it, was for the majority of them the norm, albeit their individual (religious) socialization has taken, of course, very different forms. Many Filipino nonbelievers went, for example, to Catholic schools and colleges, some worked as altar boys, or became active in other church-related activities, some eventually joined Charismatic or Evangelical groups, or attended Bible study circles, and a few even thought about becoming a priest

themselves, or about joining a missionary. Hence, and in the terms of Colin Campbell, whose "Toward a Sociology of Irreligion" (1971) I mentioned in the introduction, it is particularly Catholicism and the Catholic Church that is the main religious "tradition" and the object of "resentment" articulated by local secularist organizations such as FF and PATAS. This illustrates the need to take into account the cultural specificity of their "irreligious response" towards the local religious context.

Thus, in order to adequately contextualize the collective discourses and practices of both groups, which I will describe in detail in the remaining chapters of this thesis, I will provide in the following sections an overview of the religious landscape of the Philippines, in particular its relation with politics and how it is represented in some of the individual narratives of atheists and secular activists whom I have interviewed in Manila. In these semi-structured interviews I asked my interlocutors, for example, about their personal relation with religion and how it developed through their life, about how they talked about their nonbelief with family and friends — if they did at all, and about how it came that they eventually joined secularist groups such as FF and/or PATAS, and about their perspective on religion and politics in the Philippines.

Joining a secularist group, or the "discovery of the collective" as LeDrew called it in his study of organized atheism in North America, is an important aspect to be taken into account when approaching such individual narratives of "active atheists" about their trajectories towards nonbelief since for them "individual and collective identity (…) are inextricably intertwined" (2013b, 445). Thus, these narratives of members of FF, PATAS, or like-minded groups in Manila have to be seen as deeply embedded in, and as shaped by the "collectively enacted discourses and practices within an organizational structure" (448). On the other hand, the process of constructing collective identities is, of course, influenced by those individual members' narratives as well. As I will show, all three main identity strategies of secularist groups outlined in the introduction — *minority* discourse, a focus on the issue of religion and *morality*, and activities in support of *secularism* — become manifest in my interlocutors' views and narratives about their situation and experiences as nonbelievers.

At this point, a short methodological remark is necessary though: While for many of my interviewees their membership in such groups, indeed, played a very important role, they had, of course, also a "life" *beyond* their secular activism — full-time jobs, family and diverse social obligations, other circle of friends, sports and leisure activities

etc. Since I had for different — mainly practical — reasons no proper access to these other dimensions of their daily lives, I could not complement my interlocutors' narratives with deeper insights into how, or to what extent atheism and nonbelief actually becomes manifest in the various social interactions and conversations *outside* the "safe" space that secularist groups provide their members. The actual diversity of atheists' and secular activists' socialization, their biographical experiences and trajectories towards nonbelief, their thoughts on certain issues pertaining to religion and secularism, might thus become somewhat blurred by the seemingly "standardized" versions often presented in formal, tape-recorded interviews. Hence, the quotes taken from these interviews and presented in this chapter are used mainly for illustrative purposes. While I do not engage with these narratives on a more analytical level here, they nevertheless do provide the reader with an important glimpse on what it means or can mean to become and be a nonbeliever and a secular activist in a country perceived to be strongly dominated by religion, and in particular Catholicism. This further allows a better understanding of the specific context, in which groups like FF and PATAS are situated in, and the background, against which they organize their activities.

The religious landscape of the Philippines: a brief contextual introduction

When arriving in the archipelago's capital, Manila, for the first time as a foreign visitor, one might be astonished not only by the city's infamous traffic situation, which is "widely recognized as among the very worst around" (Lahiri and De La Cruz 2014, 19), but also by the omnipresence of religious symbols among the latter's very cause: one rarely finds a cab without wooden crosses or a crucifix hanging from the rearview mirror or little statues of the Virgin Mary on the dashboard, sometimes combined with Chinese religious ornaments; on "jeepneys," the Philippine's typical public transport vehicle, there are often colorful paintings of Jesus and other religiously-themed images, while the interior is often decorated with banners like "God bless us"; during the ride, passengers frequently cross themselves when bypassing a church; on the bus, it can happen that a man will suddenly stand up and begin preaching in the small aisle, firmly holding the Bible in his hands while the vehicle tries to find its way through Manila's congested streets.

"Religion" is not less visible in the metropolis' general architectural landscape: big churches and tiny chapels are spread throughout the whole city, be it the monumental Basilica Minore de San Sebastian in Quiapo, or the Manila Cathedral in Intramuros, the impressive, voluminous architecture of the Iglesia Ni Cristo headquarters in Quezon City — the northern part of the metropolitan area —, or the so-called "Golden Mosque" (cf. Gomez and Gilles 2014). Even at rather unexpected places, religious spaces can be encountered: the capital's famous meeting places for entertainment, consumption and leisure activities — the huge shopping mall complexes spread all over Manila — are now vested with small built-in chapels providing people air-conditioned sacred sites for their spiritual needs.

But even without traveling to the Philippines, it is possible to come across the country's ascribed "vibrant religiosity" (Sapitula and Cornelio 2014, 3) via (social) media channels such as newspapers, YouTube or Facebook. Images and videos of the well-known self-flagellations and crucifixions performed during Holy Week in Kapitangan or San Pedro Cutud, Pampanga, are now circulating globally. These ritual practices draw thousands of spectators — including both foreign and domestic tourists as well as journalists — annually to these small villages in the metropolis' surrounding provinces, and have thereby become large media events (Bräunlein 2012). When Pope Francis visited the archipelago in January 2015, his mass in Manila was extensively covered by local and foreign news stations, declaring it a "record for a papal gathering" because of its estimated 6 million attendees (AFP 2015). Held in the nation's capital region, too, but on a more regular basis, the famous Black Nazarene procession is not less impressive in terms of numbers: every year the religious event, certainly one of the biggest of its kind worldwide, attracts several millions of devotees to the ritualized carrying of the statue of Christ from Luneta to Quiapo Church — a procession that despite the short distance can last up to 22 hours, thereby, unfortunately, often causing injuries and even deaths among participants and spectators (cf. Paterno 2012). Another "tangible representation of Filipinos' Catholic identity" (Bautista 2010a, 1), which attracts millions of devotees as well, can be found behind thick glass in a shrine located in an old basilica in Cebu City: the Santo Niño de Cebu. To personally have a brief look at the majestically vested and adorned, small wooden figure of Jesus Christ as a boy, one

has to wait up to an hour in the queue.[15] Also Mary, the mother of Jesus, is object of various devotional practices, and is figured prominently in Catholic shrines all over the country. Moreover, many feast days are linked to her. In fact, Marian piety or "Marianism" constitute "a defining characteristic of Philippine Catholicism" (Sapitula 2014, 400).[16]

Given such impressive (public) displays — and further examples could easily be mentioned — of a seemingly impassionate "religiosity" in the local context, it is not surprising that the Philippines is commonly regarded, or referred to, as an overwhelmingly religious country. At least, when one looks at the official statistics on religious affiliation (see Bouma et al. 2010), this image of Philippine society seems to be more than confirmed: around 92.6% of the population subscribes to Christianity, which makes the Philippines aside from East-Timor the only Christian-dominated country within the entire Southeast Asian region. The vast majority, around 81%, of these Christian Filipinos, professes Roman Catholicism, which first was brought to the archipelago by European missionaries accompanying the Spanish colonization from the 16th century onwards. Protestantism, to which around 7.3% of the total population subscribe, entered the country mainly through American missionaries in the first half of the 20th century, in the wake of the United States' colonial overtaking of the Philippines. Two churches, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) and the Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC), which were both founded in the Philippines during the first half of the 20th century, count for 2.0% and 2.3%, respectively. While Islam had arrived in the Philippines prior to the evangelization of most parts of the country, Muslims today only account for 5.1% of the population with a majority of Sunnites, most of whom live in the Southern islands of Mindanao and Sulu.

Leaving aside their obvious limitations, such official statistics substantiate further some of the aforementioned examples of the strong dominance of Catholicism. Catholicism in general and the Catholic Church in particular have, indeed, always played important roles in Philippine society and the nation's history. As social scientists and historians alike argue, this influence — which extends into the political sphere — has to be seen in the context of a historically-shaped, discursive "co-construction between

[15] See Bautista (2010a) for a detailed "ethnohistory" of the Santo Niño, in which he analyzes the various contemporary and historical discourses revolving around the little statue.
[16] As Aristotle C. Dy (2014) shows, the figure of the Virgin Mary has also a place in Chinese religious practices in the Philippines. For a detailed ethnographic and historical discussion on the role of Marian apparitions within Filipino Catholicism see Cruz (2015).

Catholic identity and national identity," a process that Philippine scholar Maria Natividad (2012) called "religio-nationalism."

Religion, politics and national identity

> Under a post-dictatorship political environment, the Church has become a virtual policy maker.
> (Leviste 2011, 9)

While other religious organizations are similarly seen to be politically influential to some extent, e.g. through the practice of bloc voting or the endorsement of certain political candidates (cf. Quilop 2011), what Leviste (2011) calls the "Catholic Church hegemony" has been at the heart of past and current debates on the relationship between religion and politics in the Philippine context (cf. Cornelio 2013). Despite the firm anchoring of the principle of a separation between church and state in the current constitution of 1987, the de facto impact of this Catholic Church hegemony has been underscored by various contemporary socio-political issues, e.g. constitutional amendments, environmental policies (Quilop 2011), or public health programs regarding HIV/AIDS (Apilado 2009). Furthermore, its imprint on the country's legal system is reflected, for example, by the nonexistence of a divorce law (Quilop 2011, 161, 166).

As indicated by the above quote from Leviste's study, the Catholic Church's prominent role and its particular relation towards the public and political sphere has to be seen in the light of the country's recent history. While Catholicism had already been intimately tied to the Spaniards' political endeavors from the 16th century onwards, it later became, somewhat ironically, also the "idiom" through which resistance against these very efforts were articulated. (cf. Bräunlein 2008) However, it is particularly the Church's role in the popular uprising of 1986 and its interpretations that are important in this regard. This crucial historical event that became known as the "EDSA People Power Revolution", eventually led to the ousting of president Ferdinand Marcos. Millions of Filipinos followed the call of then archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Jaime Sin, to join a peaceful protest against Marcos' authoritarian regime and its "martial law" policy on one of the city's main streets, the Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue (EDSA). Thus, in this important incident the Catholic Church and the CBCP appeared as actors for the

"Filipino people" or, in other words, as actors for the re-installment and fostering of "democracy" (cf. Moreno 2006). This association shapes the public perception of the Church and its role in civil society to a considerable extent until this day: "Indeed," as Bautista put it, "the contours of Church-state relations in the Philippines can be seen in the very idea of a 'People Power Church'" (2010b, 33-34). The active and constant reproduction of the "symbiosis of religion and the post-EDSA state" as incorporated in this Catholic "People Power" narrative are manifested in concrete ways, for example, in the EDSA shrine, which was built along the street in the aftermath of the historical event (see Claudio 2013, chapter 2). It has been nurtured by the CBCP and its predecessor, the Catholic Welfare Organization (CWO), for several decades in pastoral letters and official statements, as Francisco (2014) has shown in his genealogy of this "Catholic nation imaginary." This specific discursive context enables and legitimizes the Church as it presents itself as "the moral compass of the nation" in contemporary socio-political issues like the decade-long controversial debate on reproductive health (RH) policies, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4 (cf. Bautista 2010b; Claudio 2013; Natividad 2012; Racelis 2012).

I would like to end this short section on religion and politics in the Philippines by providing a quote from an essay by the scholar of law and economist Florin Ternal Hilbay. Based on his "textual scrutiny of the [Philippine] Constitution," he wants to raise "awareness of contradictions evident from the perspective of the nontheist but largely unacknowledged on the part of the god-believer" (Hilbay 2009, 155). After providing the reader with a textual and historical contextualization of what he calls the "dismal failure of the project of secularism in the Philippines" (166), Hilbay nicely summarizes and problematizes in one of the essay's final paragraphs what many of the above-cited scholars, other observers, as well as secular activists have repeatedly pointed out:

> We are now ready to ask: is there a place for secular constitutionalism where the Supreme Court distributes 'ecumenical prayers' and allows the holding of Catholic masses in its main session hall; where politicians regularly invoke God as the source of everything that they do and what happens to them; where public school teachers pray and post religious icons in their classrooms; where public airports display statues of Mary, the supposedly virgin mother of Christ; where the Church has a say on appointments to public office crucial to its cause; where the main campus of the University of the Philippines is the site of the Church of the Holy Sacrifice; where government institutions decorate their buildings and offices with Christmas trees and nativity scenes; where most public holidays are

> Christian holidays; where divorce and abortion are banned; where religious organizations endorse candidates for public office; where religious organizations obtain money from government; where the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines gets to say whether the President ought to be impeached; where towns and villages are regularly named after saints; and where revolting includes trooping to a Catholic church in EDSA? (171)

It is this specific context, that is, the visibility and prominence of religion and its various symbols and manifestations in Metro Manila and the daily life of its inhabitants, the (statistical) vast majority of people with religious affiliation, the strong political influence of the Catholic Church, and the aforementioned discursively constructed "religio-nationalism," in which secularist groups such as FF and PATAS are situated.

"Satanism," "deviance," and "social suicide": atheism in the Philippines

> With a strong Roman Catholic background brought about by 300 plus years of Spanish rule, professing atheism may well be social suicide. (Sanchez 2008)

> To the atheist, the experience of reading the Preamble is one of ambivalence, if not alienation, for its invocation of an 'Almighty God' means that her citizenship is not sufficient for inclusion to this category of 'We, the sovereign Filipino people' and that she is out of the project of 'build[ing] a just and humane society.' Right off the bat, the entire country is conscripted into god-belief (of the monotheistic flavor) as if this incarnation were fundamental to citizenship and nationhood. With the ratification of the Constitution, the infidel became constitutionally invisible, covered by the overbearing influence of a colonial past that casts a dominant shadow on the affairs of the present. (Hilbay 2009, 154)

As self-declared atheists, agnostics, secular humanists etc., members of FF, PATAS, and like-minded groups often report — on their organizations' websites as well as during the numerous conversations we had during my fieldwork — about the (negative) social consequences of their publicly-professed nonbelief. Offended friends and family members, associations and accusations of being "evil" or influenced by "Satan," discriminatory experiences at the workplace etc., are frequently mentioned as common reactions in this regard. Similar to the above quote from the journalist Korina Sanchez (2008), but in an even more drastic and provocative tone, one PATAS member under the pseudonym "Antonio ~" put it like this in his online article: "I am an atheist but I am unhappy because I am where I am. It is like being the only Jew in the Nazi party" (2012).

While statistically, self-declared nonbelievers, indeed, constitute a minority — recent estimations speak of 1% or less of the population (see Wilfred 2014) —, their overall situation within Philippine society and the public perception of nonbelief is hard to pin down in any comprehensive sense. There are, however, some examples, which I came across during my research and which give an impression of what it might generally entail to become and be an "open" atheist in the Philippines.

In a recent article on atheists in the Philippines published in *The Atlantic*, for instance, the author Michael French (2017) quotes the sociologist Jayeel Cornelio, who has done some important research on religion and the Filipino youth, as follows: "It's almost unimaginable to think of a Filipino who is not a believer." Similarly, in a German handbook on the Philippines, edited by Niklas Reese and Rainer Werning, two well-known and longtime experts on the region, the anthropologist Simone Christ writes in her contribution to the volume about the country's religious diversity, where she states: "To not believe in God — this is completely incomprehensible to most Filipinos and Filipinas" (2014, 415; translated by author). In another article titled "Atheists Searching For Their Place in Heavily Catholic Philippines," published online at the *Jakarta Globe*, the journalist Girlie Linao (2012) cites bishop Ted Bacani, vice chairman of the Commission on Doctrine of the Faith of the CBCP, who — maybe from a somewhat biased position — put his views on the situation of Filipino atheists quite bluntly: "You are like a crazy person if you do not believe in God." He further said: "The atheists may be growing, but they are still statistically insignificant."

One of the few available scholarly engagements with atheism in the Philippines, a very interesting "impressionistic autoethnographic reflection" of sociologist Gerardo M. Lanuza (2012) about his past membership in the so-called "Atheist Circle" at the famous University of the Philippines (see chapter 2), was published in a special issue of the *Philippine Sociological Review*. The quite telling title of the issue: "Sociology of Deviance." In the foreword "deviance" is described as "behavior, identities, and conditions that violate social norms and induce stigma." Further, the content of the issue is sketched out briefly: "Student organizations such as fraternities, youth identities such as being an atheist or an istambay, Filipino soldiers, prison systems, inmate gangs in prison, and portrayal of gays in Philippine cinema consist the topics addressed by the articles in this special issue" (Candaliza-Gutierrez 2012, 1).

In 2014, the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU), an umbrella

organization for various atheist, humanist, and secularist groups worldwide, published the "Freedom of Thought Report," which was introduced as "the first annual survey looking at the rights and treatment of the non-religious in every country in the world." The goals and scope of the publication are further described as follows:

> Specifically, it looks at how non-religious individuals — whether they call themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, or are otherwise just simply not religious — are treated because of their lack of religion or absence of belief in a god. We focus on discrimination by state authorities; that is systemic, legal or official forms of discrimination and restrictions on freedom of thought, belief and expression, though we do also try to include some consideration of extralegal persecution, social discrimination and personal experience where possible. (IHEU 2014, 11)

According to the "Editorial Introduction" inside the report, each country has been checked against a number of so-called "boundary conditions" and was then rated with one of the following labels representing an order of "severity:" *Free and Equal*, *Mostly Satisfactory*, *Systemic Discrimination*, *Severe Discrimination*, and *Grave Violations*. (IHEU 2014, 18) Based on this classification system and the underlying criteria, the Philippines has been rated with "Systemic Discrimination" (288). The report identifies, for example, "systematic religious privilege," "an established church or state religion," "state funding of at least some religious schools," and further states that "[s]ome religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis" and that "[c]riticism of religion is restricted in law or a de facto 'blasphemy' law is in effect" (288). Atheists, humanists and freethinkers in the Philippines thus might not have to be afraid of physical violence, censorship, or imprisonment etc. like it is, for example, the case in other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia. Still, as the report of IHEU indicates — and all the aforementioned snippets from various sources suggest as well —, local nonbelievers generally find themselves socially in a very *marginalized* position, and are sometimes confronted with discriminatory tendencies, not only at school or work but, for example, also through public policies clearly influenced by "religious" ideas and values.

Thus, one might sum up the situation of Filipino nonbelievers with the same words that sociologists Cimino and Smith used for describing the situation of atheists in the United States: "Atheists have always been a minority in American society — and not a very popular one" (2014, 17).

“Coming out” and joining the secular movement

The perception and feeling of being “alone” in a religion-dominated society — of being misunderstood and misrepresented by a Catholic majority —, which so many of the atheists whom I talked to in Manila have expressed in various ways has, in fact, led them to start searching for other nonbelievers and to eventually join FF and PATAS — or some of their predecessors, which I will introduce in the next chapter. While some activists I spoke to got to know about FF and PATAS through the groups’ advocacy and activism regarding, for example, LGBT rights or reproductive health (RH) policies, for many members it was through digital channels that they heard about these groups for the first time. When I asked, for example, Louie, an atheist who had been very active in both groups, about how it came that he joined FF and PATAS, he told me that he had found them by intentionally looking for atheist groups in the Philippines online:

> Well, first and foremost, since I became an atheist I think it’s quite normal, or it’s part of the procedure, it’s part of the process after becoming an atheist, you find somebody, some other people just like you, especially here in the Philippines. Maybe in other countries, where it is more secular, it’s not really a big deal, because most are secular, but here in the Philippines, when you grew up religious, and people around you are religious, and they cannot relate to you, I mean, you need someone to talk to, eh, about your point of view as an atheist. So, part of the process is looking for some other people who are like you. So, with the power of the internet today it’s really easy, you just type in ‘Philippine atheists,’ ‘Philippines,’ ‘atheist,’ and then PATAS’ website will pop up.

In the introduction round at one of the FF meetups all participants were asked to tell a little bit about how they were introduced to FF, how they got to know about the group. While some said that they were simply brought to the meetup by a friend who was already a member, several of the attendees mentioned that they first found out about the existence of FF online. They had — as Louie did — explicitly looked for Philippine atheist or like-minded groups.

Against the social background sketched out above it is easily comprehensible then that one of the most important aspects of these groups is their building and strengthening of a community. When I specifically asked members of FF and PATAS what the regular discussion meetups of these groups — which I will describe in more detail in the next chapter — personally meant to them, i.e. why they attended them at

all, the chance for social interactions with people considered to be "like-minded" often appeared to be one of, or even *the* most important dimension. This was also emphasized by Garrick Bercero, one of the FF core members, in my interview with him: "As a concept the meetups are important to FF. I think, if we did nothing else, we're gonna keep doing the meetups. I mean, if we didn't do the protests, if we didn't write on the website, we didn't do the podcast, I think the meetups will always be there." When I asked him why, he replied:

> Oh, to keep the community, that's the most important part of FF, it's having a community, a visible community of freethinkers to normalize the idea that hey, this country is not just Catholics, there are people who disagree vehemently, or apathetically with religious ideas, and we exist, we have rights. And that I think is the most important thing about FF. And that's why we keep the meetups. We have to be visible in real life, we have to keep those social bonds, to keep the organization alive. (Interview with Garrick Bercero, FF, 2014)

It is those efforts to "normalize" nonbelief and the existence of atheists and freethinkers within, or vis-a-vis a society dominated by religion — particularly Catholicism and the "People Power Church," as described in the previous sections — that lie at the core of secularist organizations such as FF and PATAS.

For one young atheist I interviewed, joining such communities, in fact, meant a form of personal "empowerment," in the sense that it helped him to be not "silent" anymore with regard to his unbelief:

> I just wanted to belong. And I found out with other people, they're very hostile when you say that you're an atheist. I found out that other people were talking behind my back. I realized that other people kept their distance from me when they learned about my nonbelief. So I kept silent at first, but after that I became empowered by other atheist groups, because they keep saying that what's wrong with being yourself? Other people just have to accept you.

When atheists such as this young man talk about not being "silent" anymore about their nonbelief, i.e. when they start to openly and explicitly claim an atheist identity, for example, vis-a-vis their family and friends, they often speak of "coming out." In fact, "coming out" has become one of the central phrases among nonbelievers worldwide. It was used, for example, in the so-called "Out Campaign" initiated in 2007 by the famous "new atheist" author Richard Dawkins, and his foundation, the *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science* (RDFRS). Not coincidentally based on the gay and

lesbian rights movement, the campaign and its slogan were supposed to empower nonbelievers to publicly declare their identity as such (cf. LeDrew 2016, 127). As in the case of the former movement, also within the larger transnational secular and atheist networks the process of "coming out," often described as difficult and painful, indicates the marginalized social position that representatives of both movements may hold in various cultural contexts around the globe. The quotes from my interviews with members of FF, PATAS, and other like-minded groups in Manila, which are presented here, illustrate that for them as well "coming out" in a society that they regard as overwhelmingly religious plays an important role in their individual identity construction as atheists — and as members of a community that regards itself as a social "minority".

I usually asked my interlocutors directly about how — if at all — they would talk with their family and friends about their nonbelief. It may not come as a surprise that many of my interlocutors, indeed, seemed to have gone through a lot of troubles — sometimes in form of quite dramatic longterm consequences — by telling their religiously-inclined parents that they themselves did not believe anymore. Ronald, for instance, told me that "we had these huge argument about nonreligion in our family, so I decided not to have interactions with them anymore. So, it's actually one of the main factors why I am not speaking with my parents anymore, because of my nonbelief." The "relationships were already strain," as he said, but "when they knew that I was an atheist, the strain was much more stronger then ever before." Similarly, another longterm member of FF, and a very confident self-declared atheist, said:

> I was never really close to my family and still I'm not, but they noticed that I was slowly filling up my library with atheist books (laughs), like 'The God Delusion,' or 'God Is Not Great,' like the standard atheist tomes, and then they would ask me for that, or they would tell me — not ask me — that they were just books, and the danger with being too smart is that you might loose your faith, and then I said that I didn't have any faith anymore and then that led to some shouting matches, some forced dragging into church, but after a while they got tired of it and now they don't even have to bring me to Christmas mass.

Norberto, a nonbeliever — barely 20 years old —, whom I met at a PATAS meetup told me about the time when his parents gradually found out about his atheism. At first he had simply tried to deny it by telling them that "I'm still a Christian!" One day, however, he felt confident enough to reveal them the truth about his worldview when they asked

him about it:

> So there, finally, one time when my parents were consulting me: 'Are you really an atheist? What is happening to you?' I said: 'Fine, yes! I am an atheist…' and all hell broke loose. We had a huge fight! They wanted (…) me to talk to priests, they wanted me to talk to my guidance counselor, treating it as a kind of mental disease. And then I was really sad because they never gave me an instance to explain my beliefs.

Yet another atheist, whom I sometimes met at both FF and PATAS meetups, also mentioned his fights with his parents. Maybe less dramatic as in the case of Norberto, but, as he told me, his unbelief was used against him as well:

> I don't really tell them so much. My mom knows because it's on my Facebook page. Her reaction was pretty bad at that time, but, you know… yah, every time that we fight, it comes out: 'So, this is what an atheist is like!' Stuff like that. So she always points out to, in my fights with her, because I'm an atheist and all that shit, every time something goes wrong. Eventually I made her understand that no, we're not fighting because I'm an atheist, but we're fighting because we have a difference of opinion, and mostly because I'm right, and she's wrong (laughs).

When I asked José, who had been a nonbeliever and a FF member for quite a while, about the reactions of his family with regard to his atheism, he spoke of a "fraught" relationship. He then added:

> A few of my relatives are explicitly nonreligious, but mostly they're very religious. I get Bible quotes on my Facebook. They know, I'd been atheist a long time before I actually came out with it, I guess. When I really officially came out, I just put out on my Facebook: 'religion: atheist.' And that got some reactions. One of my aunts sent me some religious books, and that's something I've been getting pretty much all my life, Bible quotes, and stuff.

That people who got to know about his nonbelief would try to re-convert him, also happened to Ronald, whom I quoted above with regard to his serious fight with his parents. He told me that when he "reached college, I was confident enough, so I was able to tell people that I don't believe in God, I'm an atheist. And some people would try to convert me back to religion, (…) like they would invite me to Bible studies, but I told them I don't believe in God and I don't believe anything that's written in the Bible, because it's written by men."

In contrast to the ones I quoted so far, there were also some nonbelievers who simply refrained from "coming out" to their family members at all, in order to avoid

potential conflicts which they deemed as unnecessary. For Manuel, for example, an atheist who had been very active in both groups FF and PATAS, it was kind of "a respect issue at home," as he put it:

> Actually I've never told any of my relatives, or parents about it, because I know they would object to it. So I never talked about it at all. But I know somehow, you know, parents have this instinct, you know, it's like 'Oh, this kid is gay! Oh, this kid is nonreligious!' They know that, and I know somehow they know it, but it's something we just don't talk about, and it's something like a respect issue at home, that 'Ok, you keep your beliefs, I keep my disbelief.' And it would be harder for them to argue with me because I was the most religious person in the family. I was the most religious, because I almost lived in the church.

Similarly, at one of the informal post-meetup gatherings of FF, another member mentioned that he would prefer not to tell his religious parents anything about his doubts and nonreligious ideas, since he would rather "let them die in peace." Yet another case was Nico, a self-declared agnostic atheist, who had agreed to be interviewed. I waited for him in front of a coffee shop at one of the big shopping malls in Makati. He wanted to meet me there and then bring me over to his parents' house located somewhere nearby, where we wanted to conduct the interview. I saw him in the distance, almost running towards me, and thus he was breathing heavily on arrival. He told me that his parents would pick us up right here, right now, since they had been on a shopping tour and could give us a ride to their house. Just a few moments later, a big black truck-like vehicle with tinted windows stopped in front of us. About entering the car, he whispered to me that I should in no way say anything about "freethinking" during the short ride with his parents. He had mentioned to them only that I was doing some research for my thesis on Philippine "culture." A couple of hours later, after the interview — which, fortunately, went fine except for a few interruptions due to bypassing family members — I was walking back to the shopping mall together with Nico, who came with me to do some groceries there. While waiting in the line at the cashier desk in one of the supermarkets, he told me that it would probably, and almost instantly "kill" his religious father if he knew about his son's unbelief. And probably also his mother, Nico said, and then added half cynically, half tongue-in-cheek: "atheism kills!"

In such instances and in the quotes presented so far, one can see how the individual narratives of atheist activists are strongly entangled with the collective identity constructions of the secularist groups that they have joined. The *minority* discourse of nonbelievers in a country like the Philippines, which is perceived to be so strongly dominated by religion and in which they feel socially marginalized and are often confronted with misunderstandings or even hostility[17], constitutes an important factor in such organizations' community-building efforts. To "empower" their members and support them in "coming out" as atheists is thus one central strategy of FF and PATAS to "normalize" nonbelief vis-a-vis a religious majority.

Another strategy in this regard is to challenge public stereotypes and misconceptions about nonbelievers apparent "immorality." As will become clear in the next section, this issues concerning the common association of religion and morality manifests as well in my interlocutors' individual narratives about becoming and being a nonbeliever in the Philippines.

"Read the Bible to become an atheist!" Questioning religion and "Catholic" values

At one of the first gatherings of PATAS, the so-called regular meetups, which I attended during my fieldwork in Manila, one of the participants introduced himself as an "atheist," and said that one of the main reasons for his unbelief was his reading of the Bible, since it confronted him with a lot of "inconsistencies." Tess Termulo, who became PATAS first official female president only a few weeks later, seemed visibly amused by this attendee's confession and shouted to the others in a sarcastically laughing voice: "Read the Bible to become an atheist!" Similarly, at a FF meetup, one member called himself not only an "atheist," but also a "Bible geek," and said: "It was the Bible that made me a skeptic." Another atheist told me in an interview tongue-in-cheek: "Actually,

[17] Though the majority of nonbelievers I spoke to did, indeed, either experience negative reactions from family and friends when they talked with them about their views, or simply preferred not to talk about it in the first place, there were also a few instances, where members of FF and PATAS said that they had no problems at all in this regard. During the introduction round of a FF meetup, for example, one participant mentioned that while she had previously considered herself an "agnostic," she would now explicitly position herself as an "atheist." She had told her parents about her nonbelief and, as she put it, "they were cool with it." When I asked Jack about how he would talk with his family and his friends about his atheism, he said: "Well, I don't talk about religion with my family, but with my friends, yah, we talk about it a lot… all my closest friends, my closest friends in my neighborhood, my closest friends at school, they know my views, so no issue there."

I would promote the reading of the Bible more, because that started my skepticism in Church." And yet another atheist whom I have interviewed stated: "I know the Bible, like most atheists do — they know the Bible better than most religious people."[18]

Also for Jack, a self-declared "atheist" and long-term FF member mentioned above, the actual reading of the Bible constituted the source for his initial doubts and his questioning of Christianity. When he was young, Jack had "a fascination about warfare," as he told me, and "got interested into history as well." Since "the Bible is full of wars, especially the Old Testament," he got to read the latter "probably at least twice." "So I read those books, biblical books several times because of their wars," he remembered, "but that was, I think that was the trigger of my doubts in religion, because when I read what God supposedly ordered the Israelites to do in their conquest of Canaan, it made me think: Are these the actions of a benevolent God?" He gave me some examples, which according to him clearly showed that the answer to this question could be nothing but negative. Reflecting about the story of Jericho, for instance, he mentioned: "If I remember the story correctly, the walls of Jericho collapsed and the instruction of God to the Israelites were to kill everyone inside, even the animals." "That," Jack emphasized, "doesn't seem *right*." "Even the animals, I mean…," he added in a low, sarcastically laughing voice, and "the reason why all these people are being killed is just because they did not believe in God." His considerations and disagreements with those Biblical stories on a moral level, as well as the many "inconsistencies in the Bible," eventually brought him to the conclusion "that this is not a benevolent God. This is a childish, fickle-minded, and jealous God, so this is not a good God." "So I started losing my faith in religion," Jack said, "I mean, what I'm reading in the Bible I don't think these are the works of a good god, and the way priests are selling Christianity, that it's an omniscient, omnipotent, all-powerful god, but when you look at the world today, this doesn't seem like the work of an omniscient, all-powerful, and omnipotent, good god." He then threw in a question he might have asked himself many times back then, during his initial period of doubts: "If you were a good god, is this the best world that you can do?"

Jack's reading of the Bible, and his thoughts on God and morality, were thus a crucial step on his path to atheism. At first, he just stopped attending mass: "My family, they

[18] Many of my interlocutors emphasized their former deep religious engagement, especially with regard to the Bible. It often seemed that by pointing out that they knew "religion" very well, they tried to "legitimize" their own criticism of religion, or to give their arguments more weight and plausibility. This can also be seen, for example, in the early activities of PATAS under the motto of "Know Your Religion," which I will introduce in chapter 3.

pretty much accepted where I was going, so there was no pressure to go to church, unless, of course, there's a wedding, or a baptism, when I really have to be there for the family, but other than that they let me go on my way." But then "time went by," as Jack put it, and "I lost, I completely lost my faith in Christianity and came up with my own explanation on how the world works." "At first I thought that maybe there is a god, but he's not omnipotent," he told me and then started to laugh:

> Yah, he just created the world, set some laws, natural laws by which the world will turn, and after that: hands off! He doesn't take a direct hand in things anymore, so if something bad happens to you, sorry, but no amount of praying will make it right, so God doesn't take a direct hand in things. So that was my initial explanation for my own, because I couldn't accept the Christian version of how the world works anymore, so I created my own.

What he called a "transitionary period" lasted for "several years," during which he hold on to his deistic-like worldview: "I still accepted that there might be a god, but it's not benevolent, or it's not omniscient, or it's not all-powerful, it just created the world and doesn't take a direct hand in things, that was my view for a very long time." In the end, however, "the concept that there might actually be none… became more plausible," Jack told me, before he said: "So now, I'm fully there, I'm fully an atheist."

The questioning of the relation between religion and morality, as in the case of Jack, was, in fact, one of the most prevailing themes that emerged from my interviews and numerous conversations with other members of FF and PATAS as well. This, however, does not only concern the events and actions described in the Bible that Jack so strongly disagreed with. Also the contemporary behavior of "religious" people that some of my interlocutors were personally observing constituted an important source of religious doubts. When I asked, for example, Marco, a longtime FF member, who considered himself an "agnostic," about the time that eventually led to this position, he told me: "I was a very devout Catholic to the point that I signed up to be a priest, I signed up to join a missionary." Gradually, however, he "realized by going to Church that a lot of the people who were around me I found to be hypocrites, that they didn't pay attention in mass, in Church, and then as soon as they stepped out the door they forgot everything." He gave me some examples for what he meant:

> There were beggars outside the door that they didn't pay attention to, they all dressed up in their best clothes on Sundays, but it seemed to me to be fake, that you would put on your best clothes when you go to worship, because you should be worshipping your entire life, and, and anyway, I grew up being a Catholic thinking that a lot of the Catholics around me were hypocrites, so… I started loosing faith in the Church before I lost faith in God.

Ted, a self-declared atheist, and another longtime and very active FF member, got disappointed in a similar way with the behavior of "religious" people. Raised Catholic, Ted joined an Evangelical group in high-school, because "they were very youth-oriented" and he "wanted to enjoy the dancing and the singing" that happened at their meetings, "nothing at all like the Catholic Church services, which were pretty plain ceremonial." "So I attended the Bible studies and all their meetings," he told me, "but in one of our Bible study things we had a Minister who talked about, he was Welsh and he talked about, so he was on mission here and he talked about renting their house, since the family was here, and they were trying to kick out the woman who rented it because she was not married and she had a child, so that, that wasn't the first time, but that sort of put an idea in my head: that's not right." Ted further said that "as a Christian in the Philippines you're sort of required to be homophobe, that's a very socially ingrained homophobia in the Philippines, so, there's that, but I found gay friends in high-school and that was very hard to reconcile, their living in sin and then you're supposed to condemn them, but they're perfectly nice people."

Some of my interlocutors did not only feel a strong discomfort with the moral teachings of Catholicism as such, or with what they considered as moral *mis*behavior of religious adherents — they also saw a more systemic malpractice happening within the institution of the Catholic Church. As Marco, whom I quoted above, for example, told me: "When I was in Facebook I posted lots of atheist-related things and things against the Church, especially my hatred for the fact that the Catholic Church hides pedophiles, that's really one thing — and Child rapists —, I mean that's one thing I really hated about religion, about organized religion, especially when you can organize the protection of rapists, and you can hide them from authorities, and I figured… ehm, well, I wasn't in a stand for that, so I posted a lot of that stuff online." Another FF member said that already as a child he was wondering about "the connection with money and the Church," since "every Sunday I would be told to go to church, so I would go there, and then my mother would give me five pesos. But, when I go to school, she would only

give me one to two pesos. But, for the church she would give me five pesos for the priest." Back then, this seemed obviously "odd" to him, so he did some research in his books and discovered "a bit of corruption," as he put it.

These snippets from my conversations with members of secularist groups in Manila reveal the importance of issues around "morality" for their identity constructions as atheists.[19] Considering the public misconceptions or prejudices that nonbelievers feel themselves to be confronted with in the Philippines as well as, for example, in the United States (see Smith 2011), this might come as little surprise. The afore-mentioned common association of "religion" with "morality," and "atheism" with "immorality" certainly contributes to the noticeable urge of my interlocutors to point out negative

[19] Aside from what is commonly known as "the problem of evil," or "theodicies," and the personal dissatisfaction with the perceived moral misbehavior of religious people — and particularly within the institution of the Catholic Church —, there were according to my interviewees, of course, other sources and triggers for their religious doubts and questionings, for example, the geographical contingency of religion. Marco, for instance, told me:

> Eh, I, I realized like what, what really is the difference between me and other people who have different religions, because as I moved further and further away from my birthplace I saw other people from other religions and the diversity of faith, and I realized like, the only difference between me and this other person is they happen to be born in a place where the religion is different, and they were-, if I was born in the Middle East, for example, the chances are I would have been raised in a family that was Muslim, and I would have been taught Islam and I would have been a Muslim myself, and the only difference is that different geographies have different books that are prevailing, and I started thinking, well, what are the differences in these books? Where did they come from and why do, why does one location believe in one book, another location in another? And, and it just occurred to me that, well, there is no reason, the only reason my parents believe in this book is because their parents told them that this book is true, and the only reason their parents believe that is because either their parents or the Church or some priest, some authority figure told them that this book is true and not that other-, other book, so don't believe that other book, believe in this book…

"So, at that point I became an agnostic," Marco said, "when I realized that there really isn't a difference in, between religions besides their geography." Joaquin, another FF member, who grew up in a rural area and moved to Manila only later in his life to look for work, had similar thoughts about the geographical contingency of particular religious traditions in his mind, when he was still a kid. However, as he told me, his questions about his doubts were never answered by the people he asked about it: "So, and then, and till such time that, when I discuss things to people, they would either refer me to higher people like priests, or bishops, or pastors. Other, rather than answer the question directly. I would pose questions like: What if the Spaniards weren't able to convert, or weren't able to come here in the Philippines, who would our God be? And they would feel really bad about my question that they would sometimes be hostile and attack me directly for questioning, so that, then again, that added to my doubts."

examples that are supposed to deconstruct the former linkage, while at the same time they emphasize their own capacity of being and acting "moral" as self-declared atheists, thereby trying to proof the latter linkage as wrong. As I will show in chapter 5 this becomes manifest not only on such an individual level: with its so-called "Free Medical Clinic," a humanitarian activity that PATAS members have organized in poor areas outside Manila in 2014, the group tried to counter stereotypes in this regard by proofing that one can, indeed, be "good without God." This motto, in fact, is used by secularist groups worldwide. The activities under this motto provide those atheist members a form of "moral validation" (LeDrew 2016, 131) vis-a-vis a social majority, who in the case of the Philippines is perceived to be dominated by "Catholic values," and thus they constitute one of the main identity strategies of secular groups in their struggle to "normalize" nonbelief in such specific cultural contexts.

One area in which those "Catholic values" are seen as interfering strongly with other "values" is, as mentioned before, the political sphere, especially with regard to public policies such as the reproductive health bill. Hence, as secularists and activists, members of FF and PATAS do, of course, attach great importance to the issue of church-state separation, as I will show in the last section of this chapter.

Against the "People Power Church": activists' perspectives on religion and politics

Even if they might not consider religion as such a problem, its "meddling with politics" — as one FF member put it once — is for the members of FF and PATAS as secular activists unacceptable. In the words of this self-declared atheist: "Religion is a major part of Filipinos' lives, but as I said, I don't want to force my views on anyone, but hopefully the time will come when people will outgrow this. I'm okay with religion per se, but the way the Catholic Church in the Philippines uses its influence on people to participate in politics, that's the thing that really puts me off." Despite its firm anchoring in the country's constitution the separation between church and state is according to most of my interlocutors *de facto* non-existent. Different examples for a violation of the separation clause were mentioned and discussed in various contexts during my fieldwork, in the interviews with members of FF and PATAS, and also in the group's online articles.

In a meetup of the Metro Manila South chapter of FF, for instance, one of the announced discussion topics was "Special treatment for religious organizations by the government." Raymar introduced the issue by mentioning certain banners or billboards that he had seen hanging around in the streets, on which local politicians officially greeted or congratulated the Catholic Church — or some other religious organizations — on specific occasions. A clear "violation of secularism," he said. Then he pulled out his smartphone and showed the other attendees a picture he himself had recently taken: a statue of the Virgin Mary placed inside a governmental office. Later, at the end of the discussion Raymar called upon the others to use their smartphones as well to take photos whenever they would see something like this in any official buildings of governmental agencies. They should then send them to FF to support the group's fight for secularism.

When I asked one of the FF core members about how he generally saw the relation between religion and politics in the country, he told me something similar to what Raymar had mentioned at the meetup:

> So in politics, the politicians wear their religion on their sleeve at all times. There was this one time where a politician tried to file a bill that would disallow religious displays, statues, in public buildings, because if you've noticed in *Landbank*, which is a government bank, if you've noticed in the post office, in the… eh, Supreme, yah, in the Supreme Court, in Congress, you will see shrines everywhere, statues of Mary, not just a crucifix — so that would even be a little more forgivable, because the vast majority are Christians… I mean, it's not forgivable, but it's more for forgivable, in the spectrum of forgiveness. But these are statues of Mary, so these are explicitly Catholic. If you are not Catholic, you're not recognized as a Philippine citizen in these government buildings.

The bill that my interlocutor was talking about — also called the "anti-God bill" — was filed by Rep. Raymond Palatino, but after public outrage, and "strong condemnation from Catholic bishops and other lay leaders" (Aning 2012), was withdrawn and apologized for. Another FF member also mentioned the bill in our interview:

> I don't remember the acronym of the bill, but it was against the eh, religious… eh, it was a pro-secularism thing. Basically, what he wanted was all the religious statues and stuff on government property to be removed. So that's one thing that I wish he had fought for, but his own party was against him at that, so it was daring of him to even suggest it, but a lot of Catholics, a lot of people in the country, a lot of politicians, and a lot of youth even were against it. They like

> being the majority religion in the Philippines, they like that. There is a Mother Mary, and some other (?) types-things on government property and the assumption is that if you're Filipino you're Christian, you're Catholic.

As he further said, "you won't see any Muslim pictures, or Muslim drawings, you'll see Christian, eh, Catholic things, and it's not fair to other religions and those without religions, so yah, I think this issue is a freedom of religion-issue, and freedom from religion-issue."

The presence of religious, and specifically Catholic symbols inside government buildings was, in fact, something that several activists had pointed out to me when we talked about secularism. It reflects the discursive association that I have discussed in chapter 1 of "being Filipino" with "being Catholic," and its pendant on a moral level of "Filipino values" with "Catholic values," which secularist groups and their members are contesting. The president of PATAS, Tess Termulo, from whose interview I took one of the introductory quotes at the beginning of this chapter, mentioned a similar example, which is worth quoting at some length here. As she told me, she actually used to discuss a lot with her friends about these issues:

> Well, the first religion that comes to mind is Catholicism because it's the one that's very active politically in the Philippines, so, of course, CBCP [=Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines] comes to mind, because they always make *sawsaw*[20] (laughs) in the political issues, they're always there. They push their agenda in the political arena and people are used to letting CBCP do it. People are used to letting religious belief pervade in secular issues. I think they are used to it so much that they don't recognize that that is what is happening. Because whenever I talk to some of my friends, who are religious or they have religious beliefs, when they tell them that: 'No, the state should not favor any religion.' Like if we're gonna talk about some government offices conducting or sponsoring mass for, for their employees during office hours or office time. So I would say: 'No, that should not happen because the government should not favor any religion. If they're going to hold mass for Catholic employees then maybe for, they should also sponsor something for the Muslims who are also government employees. Or for the Protestants or for the Born-Again, or for whatever religion. Because they have to treat everyone equally.' When I tell my friends that, they would tell me: 'Oh, why you make a lot of fuss about something so little? It's just a mass.' They cannot see the implication of a supposedly small thing in the attitude of many people. It is as if they're so used to it that it's normal. And when people point out *na*[21]: 'No, that should not happen because if you're gonna look

[20] *Sawsaw* usually means "to dip," e.g. food into a sauce, and is used metaphorically here.
[21] na = already, now, immediately.

> at the constitution that's not allowed to do, that's not constitutional.' They would say: 'Ah but it's just a little thing,' or, then... eh. Okay, here is one, here's one common justification for that, they would say: 'Oh, Philippines is a Catholic country, so you should expect that! There are many Catholics in the country, so if the government or the government offices sponsor Catholic masses for people, well, that's because there are a lot of government employees who are Catholic. So it's beneficial to the majority, so let them be!' So, some of my friends commonly use that 'beneficial to the majority' argument — so since a lot of Catholics, then it's okay to have Catholic mass. (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014)

As one FF member further told me:

> So that is a microcosm of how religion in general plays in politics here, it's generally just Catholic ideas and then, when Catholic ideas are in congruence with Islamic ideas, they'll show: Oh, even the Muslims agree with us! But when they disagree, like on divorce, they'll just ignore it. Or maybe you can have your law in your small part of Mindanao[22], you can have divorce there, but elsewhere no divorce for everyone. So our laws are largely dictated by what the Catholic Church allows, so that includes prostitution, I think pornography is also illegal here, and divorce. All these issues at the core of them are dictated by religious motifs.

Another example that is often mentioned in this regard — a law that is regarded as being strongly influenced, or rather totally blocked by the Catholic Church as well — is the law concerning reproductive health (RH) policies, which I briefly mentioned in the introduction and which I will look at in more detail in chapter 4.

According to Jack, whom I also talked to about the role of religion in Philippine society, religious authorities, in particular the priests, knew very well about their power of being able to influence the people with regard to political issues:

> As of now, it has a very big role in Philippine society, I mean there is only a handful of atheists in the country, most of the people still, still go to church, actually listen and take to heart what the priests tell them. Especially the older generations, I mean, my mother has a very high opinion of our Parish priest, so that's very, that's very common in communities, especially with the older people, so they really take the priests' statements to heart. And our priests know that, so maybe that's what encourages them to meddle in politics, because they know they have a hold on the people.

[22] Here, my interlocutor refers to Mindanao as the group of islands in the Southern Philippines, where in some Muslim-dominated parts the so-called Code of Muslim Personal Laws (CMPL), a local "version of Sharia Law" (Lidasan 2015) applicable only to Filipino Muslims has been implemented. It "covers personal status, marriage and divorce, matrimonial and family relations, succession and inheritance, and property relations between spouses" (ibid.).

He further told me: "So it's okay for me if there's a small handful of atheists in the Philippines, if the Philippines remains Catholic, majority remains Catholic, that's okay for me, as long as religion is kept in the church, it doesn't meddle with politics."

I also asked Red Tani, the founder and president of FF, about his thoughts on the relation between religion and politics, and he told me: "So, on paper we should be secular, we have a secular constitution like the United States. But because of our, you know, because of how much religion is entangled in government, we might as well be a theocracy." He then added:

> It's just that Catholicism today is a very progressive and developed version of what it could have been if it didn't have so much time to develop. So, it's a very secular theocracy, which is a very funny, you know, funny way of saying things, a funny phrase, but (...) when Catholicism gets its privileges, you know, that's theocracy right there. It doesn't really trample on the other progressive human rights: freedom of speech, you know, freedom of conscience so much. It's really the freedom of religion and freedom of belief, freedom of conscience, that becomes affected, and in a very particular way. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2014)

"So, it's very subtle, the theocracy that happens, when Catholicism is promoted," Red said, and explained to me further what he meant: "The apparent effect that it has on the population is not so much, because they are after all predominantly Catholic. And because people have been used to it, they don't see it as a violation of their rights, whenever Catholicism is promoted instead of a citizen's different religion. They don't see this a violation, they just see it as business as usual." "Freedom of exercise is mostly respected in this country," he continued, "but the non-establishment clause is not." He then shared with me some of his more concrete observations in this regard:

> Like, everywhere you go, it's really promotion of Catholicism in particular, or Christianity in general. Or, in a more general sense, the Abrahamic religions. So, it's one of those three that happens: promotion of Catholicism, or Christianity, or Abrahamic religions. As if it's the state religious belief, you know. When they do, when they try to be pluralistic and inclusive, they end up with Abrahamic practices. Whenever there are, let's say prayers, it's a very Abrahamic prayer. They think that they're being pluralistic and inclusive when they have, when they go as far as including Muslims, or Jews, that's enough for them. But of course, it's not, because there are so many other outlooks practiced here in the Philippines, you know, and most especially *nonreligion* is also a valid outlook that's no less deserving of being respected by the government. But for them, the default position is *having* a religion. That alone is already a violation of the freedom from

> the influence of other religions that should be afforded by the non-establishment clause of our constitution, but like I said, that just is being ignored right now. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2014)

As these quotes from my interviews with atheist activists in Manila show, the perceived privileging of religion by the state, in particular Catholicism, as manifest, for example, in religious symbols in governmental offices is what they see a violation of this separation clause. According to them the constant violation, on the other hand, prevents the public acceptance of, and the respect vis-a-vis other religious, and, of course, *non*religious outlooks. As mentioned in the introduction, the fight for a stronger separation of religion and politics is thus one important strategy of secularist groups in the Philippines to get closer to their goal of "normalizing" atheism, or other forms of nonbelief within their Catholic-dominated society.

CONCLUSIONS

As LeDrew has emphasized in his study on secularist activists in North America: "The collective and social movement aspects of atheism are crucial to our understanding of individual atheist identity formation" (2013b, 431). Joining a secularist group — becoming an "active" atheist — is important in the process of their personal identity construction as nonbelievers. What became clear in this chapter is how the main collective identity strategies of FF and PATAS, which I have distinguished in the introduction as minority discourse, morality discourse, and secularism discourse, respectively, all become manifest in the narratives of their individual members. "Discovering" an "extant atheist identity," which is "constructed through collectively enacted discourses and practices within an organizational structure" (448), can thus function as a form of "empowerment" for individual nonbelievers — as in the case of the young atheist, whom I have quoted above — to articulate their atheist identities particularly in religious-dominated societies and thereby contribute to the "normalization" of nonbelief in such a context like the Philippines.

On the other hand, the heterogeneity of individual trajectories, experiences, and views on various issues related, for example, to the separation of religion and politics, which members of such organizations bring into those "collectively enacted discourses

and practices," become manifest in, as well as shape the tensions, dynamics, and changes that also run through the larger transnational secular movement. For instance, in the discussions about the appropriate stance of secularist groups towards potential cooperative relationships with religious actors in their fight for common socio-political goals, or on whether organized atheists should be more or less "militant" in their approach of criticizing religion, these "internal disagreements over goals and strategies" come to the fore, and as such — as LeDrew reminds us — they are "statements about identity" (449).

After providing a general overview on organized forms of secularism in Metro Manila, and a more in-depth introduction of FF and PATAS, I will describe and analyze in the remaining chapters of this thesis how some of these dynamics of collective identity constructions are reflected in the shifting relations of FF and PATAS — as the main representatives of the contemporary secular movement in the Philippines — towards the local religious context, which has been described as strongly dominated by the Catholic "People Power Church" (Bautista 2010b).

Chapter 2

Organized Secularism in Metro Manila

An Overview

As mentioned in the introduction, organized secularism in the Philippines must be considered a rather recent phenomenon when compared to countries with a long tradition of atheist, humanist, and freethinking groups, such as the United Kingdom and the United States (Budd 1977; Campbell 1971; Jacoby 2004; Royle 1974, 1980), or India (Quack 2012a). To my knowledge, the first organizations with a similar outlook appeared in the Philippines only in the 1990s. Since then, however, a plethora of groups has emerged, in particular after local access to the internet became more affordable and social media got very popular. Through these digital channels Filipino nonbelievers could find each other more easily, e.g. on mailing lists and online forums. Many of such atheist-inclined platforms and blogs disappeared as quickly as they had popped up, leaving little traces of their existence at all. Others, however, can still be found online, even though they might have been inactive for some time. Out of those "online" communities some "offline" secularist groups have emerged, while, on the other hand, some organizations that have existed already in the "offline" world became now very active also "online."

This chapter gives an overview on this variety of organized secularism in the Philippines, past and present.[23] I'm going to introduce some individuals, without whom any such sketch of the history and the contemporary situation of atheist activists would be more than incomplete, and some of whom we will, in fact, meet again in later chapters. I will further describe some of the spaces and places, where one could, or still can encounter different forms and manifestations of atheism and freethinking in Metro

[23] It is based mainly on my own internet research, the support of several atheists in Manila who dug deep in their personal memories, or provided me with numerous documents — so-called "grey literature," i.e. leaflets, pamphlets etc. —, an unpublished MA thesis by Villamin (2008), and an auto-ethnographic essay by Lanuza (2012).

Manila. As will become clear in these sections and throughout the entire thesis, most of those groups, places, and individuals are not only connected to each other in — often more, sometimes less — direct ways, but also linked to the organizations that have been the main focus of my research: the *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF) and the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS). Thus, the overview to be presented here ensures an adequate contextualization of these two groups, whose profiles I will outline in more detail in the next chapter.

Early beginnings

According to John Paraiso, a longterm atheist activist in Manila whom I will introduce below in more detail, the history of atheism in the Philippines has started in the 1960s in form of a radio program hosted by a person called Damian Sotto. In a Facebook post on January 27, 2014, Paraiso wrote:

> In the late 60's Damian Sotto started this fiery radio program that directly criticizes Filipino religious practices. As what information I just gathered, he denounces Catholic practices and ridicule saints in his radio program. Talk about blasphemy. I really don't have any idea if Mr. Sotto was an atheist. It's the 60's, right? (Paraiso 2014)

Poch Suzara, another important local atheist, described Sotto — whom he once had met personally — in a short blog entry as "a great and a rare Filipino," who "cursed to high heavens the saints, filling the air waves with truths against holy scriptures for the masses to listen. He confronted the Catholic Church head on — to put up or shut up" (Suzara 2007; cf. Villamin 2008, 58-59).

Aside from this quite interesting early public expression of individual anti-religiousness, or anti-Catholic Church views, there are two places or phenomena particularly worth describing in more detail in my historical sketch of secularist groups in Manila. While they cannot be regarded as *organized* forms themselves, both have played a significant role for the formation of the local secular movement as such: a small bookstore and his owner, and the weekly debates that have been taking place at two famous public places in the capital — Plaza Miranda and Rizal Park — for several decades.

Joaquin Po and the Popular Bookstore

As I was told by some local nonbelievers, back then it had been the only place, where one could find books about atheism. Before it moved to Quezon City in 2001, the "Popular Bookstore" was located on Doroteo Jose Street — in close neighborhood not only to the old Mapua campus and the "University Belt" area in Manila, but also to the offices of newspapers such as the *Manila Times*. Founded in 1946 by Joaquin Po and his brothers, it thus became a favorite spot for students, intellectuals, and journalists. In particular, during the politically difficult times of "martial law" declared in the 1970s by president-dictator Ferdinand Marcos, the small shop comprised one of the "quasipublic spaces for gathering," where activists and artists could find inspiration and exchange ideas, as the renown Philippine historian Vicente L. Rafael described it (2013, 482). The small bookshop was, indeed, meant to be "a wellspring of critical thought for Filipinos," as one of the daughters of Joaquin Po, Geraldine Dina Po, is quoted in a cover story in the business magazine SME (Reyes and Liuag 2010, 16). "Inspired by the rationalist and humanist ideals of Joaquin," the authors of the article further state, "Popular Bookstore has carried on as a vehicle for developing the 'inquiring mind' among Filipinos" (16). Joaquin Po, who passed away in 1998 at the age of 82, is mentioned there as a "freethinker" (18), and a "lucky atheist" (21). His daughter, Dina Po, whom I talked to during one of my visits at the bookstore, called him an "agnostic." She also gave me a printout of a short obituary composed by the *Philippine Society of Rational Humanists* (PSRH), of which he was the "president emeritus" and "whose members he constantly inspired" (PSRH n.d.). According to the PSRH, Po "preached and practiced a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion" and he considered "the goals of life" as "derived from human needs and interests rather than from theological and ideological abstractions" (PSRH n.d.).

In the early 1990s, Po, together with some members of the PSRH — for example, above-mentioned Poch Suzara, one of the earliest outspoken atheists in Manila — published a small red book called "The Freethinker's Reader,"[24] which was then sold at his bookshop. It featured reprints of Bertrand Russell's famous essay "Why I Am Not a Christian," and "Some Reasons Why I Am a Freethinker" by Robert Green Ingersoll. Po's

[24] One of the elderly atheists of the "coffee shop atheists" still had a personal copy of the booklet, and photocopied it for me.

apparent fascination for Bertrand Russell is still evident in the bookstore today. Right on entering the building, one is welcomed by a huge poster of the British philosopher pinned on the wall along the small staircase leading up to the shop, which is located on the first and second floor. Suzara wrote the foreword, and under the pen name of "Carlos Esteban" another local atheist contributed two short pieces titled "What is Prayer?" and "On Religious Intolerance." A short general remark is printed on one of the first pages of the booklet, indicating its supposed purpose: "This booklet is free from copyright. The reader may therefore feel free to reproduce or reprint any of the articles for distribution to friends who would dare to release themselves from the shackles of religion and superstition." Irrespective of the fact that it mainly contains articles written by foreign writers, "The Freethinker's Reader" can be regarded as one of the earliest atheist-inclined local publications. At my first visit at the Popular Bookstore I further discovered similar booklets and pamphlets of Poch Suzara and by some other Filipino atheists, whom I will introduce below.

Debating at "Luneta"

Not only during daytime tourists and local people are drawn to the famous Rizal Park — because of its shape also known as "Luneta" —, where the national hero of the Philippines, Jose Rizal, had been executed by the Spanish colonial authorities in 1896, and which now is home to a Japanese Garden, a Chinese Garden, and several museums including the National Museum of Anthropology, the National Planetarium, and the National Museum of Natural History. At night, especially on weekends, when the sun has already settled down, but the air is still hot and humid, the green areas of the park are filled with numerous groups of people, families, and couples, eating, drinking, talking, or watching and listening to the free concerts and performances held at the Open Air Auditorium. Children are running around, food stalls serve instant coffee and little snacks.

At one area in the park, around the so-called "Chess Plaza," every Saturday and Sunday from 8pm onwards, one is likely to bump into small crowds of people, forming a circle around two, or more debaters who are loudly, and enthusiastically engaged with each other's arguments, thereby gesticulating wildly, holding up their Bibles and Korans, pointing towards, and quoting certain passages in them. People who are

walking by often stop and listen curiously to the heated discussions — all held in Tagalog — between adherents of various religions and denominations, from Catholicism to Born-Again, from Islam to Protestantism. Some of the bystanders pull out their smartphone, or pocket camera and start taking pictures and videos of the event, including one very excited anthropologist who was brought there by some current and former PATAS members in order to meet some of the "veterans" of atheism in the Philippines, who join the debates now and then as well. Previously, they had referred to themselves, however, only as "freethinkers" until John Paraiso introduced the term "atheism" among them. With his help I was able to interview a couple of these elderly atheists, some of whom had been participating at the weekend debates in Luneta for more than a decade, but there were also some younger ones who likewise enjoyed to hang out there. At times, the debates as such became quite intense, the general atmosphere, however, always remained friendly and relaxed, and mocking, joking, or laughing was an important part of it. Many of the participants, in fact, knew each other well. Although the debates and the area around it were used to some extent also for proselytization efforts, for example, by some Muslims who handed out copies of the Koran for free, the whole thing seemed to be more like a form of entertainment for both the debaters themselves and those who were watching.

As I was told, the debates had first started at Plaza Miranda, which is located in front of the famous Quiapo Church, and which was the site of the 1971 bombing incident that happened there during a political rally of the Liberal Party. Because of the difficult political situation under president Ferdinand Marcos who declared martial law in 1972, the debates not shifted only geographically to the Chess Plaza area in Luneta, but also thematically. While initially they had been more about political issues, the topic of religion now became the main focus since it was regarded as less dangerous. A guy called Marcelino, together with a lawyer called Aracas, however, had introduced atheist-related topics already at Plaza Miranda and thus they are considered the "pioneers of atheism" in the Philippines. According to John, those early nonbelievers who had been debaters at Plaza Miranda were mainly "communist inclined atheists."

Figure 5: People gathering in Luneta for nightly debates.

Figure 6: Debaters at the Chess Plaza in Luneta engaging with each other on religious issues.

At Luneta, the atheists had used photocopies of entire books, since the books themselves were too expensive for them to buy. In fact, as I was told, the activists there still represented mainly the lower social strata of Philippine society and thus lacked access to any further educational resources. The atheism that they articulated was more of a "practical" kind — based on personal experience and common sense —, not the philosophical, "intellectual" one that characterized, for example, the atheist and secularist groups who were later established at universities, such as the "Atheist Circle" of the University of the Philippines. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 6, such characterizations based on socio-economic factors and educational backgrounds play an important part in the collective identity constructions of FF and PATAS as well.

The 1990s: "Bertrand Russell to the rescue"

Still a bit sleepy, but full of expectation, I find myself standing in front of a church in Makati, the business district of Metro Manila, on a Sunday morning in February 2014. I am supposed to finally meet Poch Suzara, who is regarded as "the grandfather of atheism in the Philippines." Somewhat ironically, a mass is going on in the open-air, chapel-like construction known as the "Greenbelt Church," due to its location at the huge shopping mall complex called "Greenbelt." Almost sneaking, I slowly walk around the church, which is surrounded by several dozens of people watching the service, until I bump into John Paraiso, who had agreed to introduce me to Suzara — his "mentor," as he put it. John told me that he hadn't seen Suzara for a while, the relationship with him was an on-and-off-like thing. We first walk towards a restaurant somewhere nearby, where he usually spends his Sunday mornings, having coffee with a couple of atheist friends. Since we cannot find him there we take a look at a Mc Donald's branch, where according to John they also had meetings in the past. Unfortunately, they are not there neither. Thus, we try it at the gated community, where Suzara is supposed to live. Not there. Shortly before I get overwhelmed by my disappointment, we finally discover Suzara sitting alone at a table inside the food court on the lower floor of one of the Greenbelt buildings. After a short introduction of myself, he immediately agrees to be interviewed, finishes his breakfast, and brings us straight to the restaurant, at which we had been looking for him a while ago. Now, one of his friends is waiting there already, and after some time the other members of what John called the "group of coffee shop atheists" arrive one-by-one.

Poch Suzara and the Bertrand Russell Society (BRS) - Philippines

As in the case of the bookseller Joaquin Po introduced above, also for Poch Suzara the famous essay "Why I Am Not a Christian" and its even more famous author Bertrand Russell played an important role in his life as an atheist activist. In fact, the very first secularist organization in Manila that I got to know of was established by Suzara as a local branch of the US-based *Bertrand Russell Society* (BRS). Though publicly the *BRS-Philippines* (BRS-PH) as such was not advertised as a group of nonbelievers, its agenda was clearly shaped by the strong anti-religious views of its founder.

As many Filipino atheists, also Suzara went to a Catholic school, but later got expelled from high-school, because his teachers could not bear his questioning anymore. As he told me in our interview: "I was always questioning everything that was being taught to us, especially religion. And they didn't like it because some of my questions caused a lot of laughter from my classmates, so my teachers felt that I was poisoning their minds with questions." Since he saw a lot of poverty, disorder, chaos, and insanity in the streets, and not much improvement in the country despite praying everyday, he asked himself: "If these prayers are true, where are the results?" "How come we're getting poorer and poorer," Suzara had wondered back then, "we're getting more disorderly, we're going backwards, we're not going forward, we're not improving our roads, we're not improving anything in this country. Despite the fact that we pray for these things, nothing happens!" At that time he stumbled upon the writings of Bertrand Russell and was immediately impressed and fascinated. The British philosopher was able to articulate many of the things that Suzara hadn't had words for yet, and thus he decided to write Russell a letter. "And much to my surprise," as Suzara proudly told me, "I got a reply." Suzara's admiration for Russell further became clear when he said: "The explanation, the arguments, the reason behind atheism was exposed to me mostly by Bertrand Russell." (Interview with Poch Suzara, Manila, 2014)

Later, when he was living and working in the US for some time, Suzara got to know about the existence of the *Bertrand Russell Society* (BRS) through the magazines of the *American Atheist Association*, which he had subscribed to. He contacted the BRS telling them about his plans to set up a local branch of the BRS in Manila after his return to the Philippines. According to an entry on the former website of the BRS, this Philippine chapter of the BRS (BRS-PH) was eventually formed in 1992 (BRS n.d.). From January

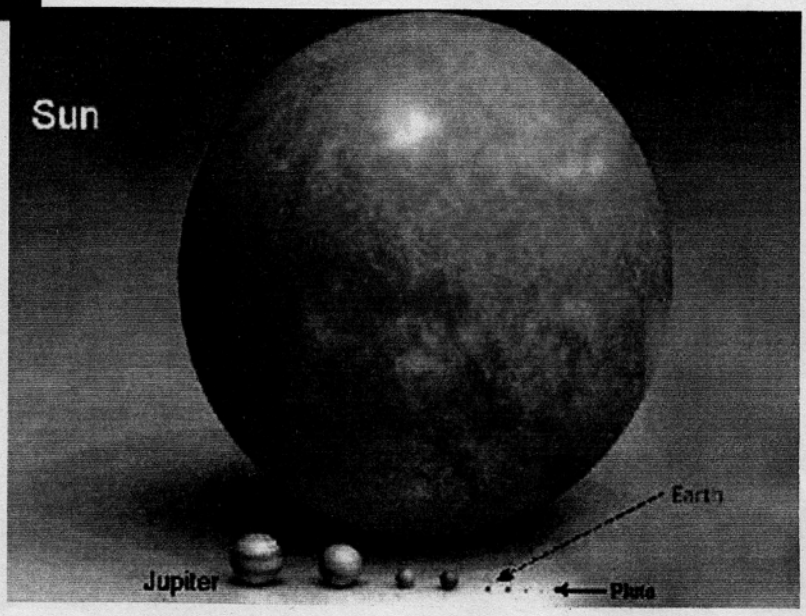
1996 to December 1998, Suzara further served as a member of The Bertrand Russell Society Board of Directors of the main branch in the US. As I mentioned before, the Philippine group that Suzara had established was not explicitly an atheist group as such. A "Fact Sheet" about the BRS-PH stated that its general purpose was just "to foster better understanding of Russell's work, and to further his aims by promoting his ideas and causes he thought important." Still, "some specific aims" listed on the sheet as well comprised the promotion of "Russell's ideas as attractive, rational alternatives to alienation, cynicism, and belief in the supernatural" (BRS-PH n.d.). Another one-page-leaflet of the group, which I was given a copy of, presents the reader with some criticism of religion in a more direct manner (see figure 7).

Suzara authored and edited numerous pamphlets officially published by the BRS Philippine chapter, some of which I could still buy at the Popular Bookstore introduced above. As one might guess already from their titles — for instance, "The Revealed Truth in the Holy Bible as written by The Inspired Authors of God," "The Fools Versus the Wise: Bible Contradictions, Inconsistencies, Absurdities, Obscenities, and Atrocities," or "Woman: The Corrupt Image of God" —, these short booklets also communicated the author's rather critical views on religion in a quite straightforward way (see figure 8). Aside from these smaller publications, Suzara further produced several larger books, among them, for example, his "Bertrand Russell to the Rescue: Can the Wit and Wisdo of Bertrand Russell save the Philippines?" (see figure 9) Published in 2003 and also distributed by the Popular Bookstore, the book — as explained in a short editorial note by Suzara — contained a "compilation of newspaper clippings used as visual aid to assist readers in understanding and appreciating the works of Bertrand Russell, one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers" (2003). Suzara's anger at religion becomes manifest very vividly in the rest of the editorial, which is thus worth to quote at length:

> This in the dark and tragic background of the only Christian country in Asia — the Philippines, a leading example of a faith-damaged culture mired in predominantly pre-scientific ways of thinking. It graphically illustrates what Russell opposed and logically argued against throughout his long life. The clippings also show that even at this late date of the rapid import of technology into the world, the Philippines, unlike its successful Asian neighbors, has not qualified as a scientific nation. Its educational system fails to instill the ethics of independent critical thinking and ignores what Russell stood for and championed: the conquest of fear, ignorance, superstition, criminality, poverty, and, indeed, thoughtless procreation as inspired by blind faith in divinity. (2003)

Bertrand Russell Society, Philippines

• homepage: www.geocities.com/russellsociety_phils
• email: pocholosuzara@yahoo.com
• PO Box 3036, Makati City.
• Tel No: 8107592



One million planets the size of earth could fit inside the sun. The sun itself is no big giant. There are existing stars bigger and older than our sun. To think that on this speck of dust called earth, God created man in his own image and likeness. This is same speck of dust in space where the Son of God Jesus was born to destroy the devil in order to save man from eternal damnation? Could anything be more terrestrially ludicrous, if not celestially ridiculous?

In the meantime, thanks to human stupidity, we are making a mess of the only home we got - the blue planet earth. We are destroying ourselves for the sake of a divine grace up there and to hell with the human race we were taught to hate down here.

And to think that millions upon million of superstitious primitives believe that one day God will establish his kingdom on this speck of dust called "earth" floating aimlessly in the Milky Way galaxy. And there are more than a trillion of such galaxies existing out there.

Poch Suzara

The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge

Figure 7: One-page leaflet produced by the *Bertrand Russell Society Philippines* (BRS-PH).

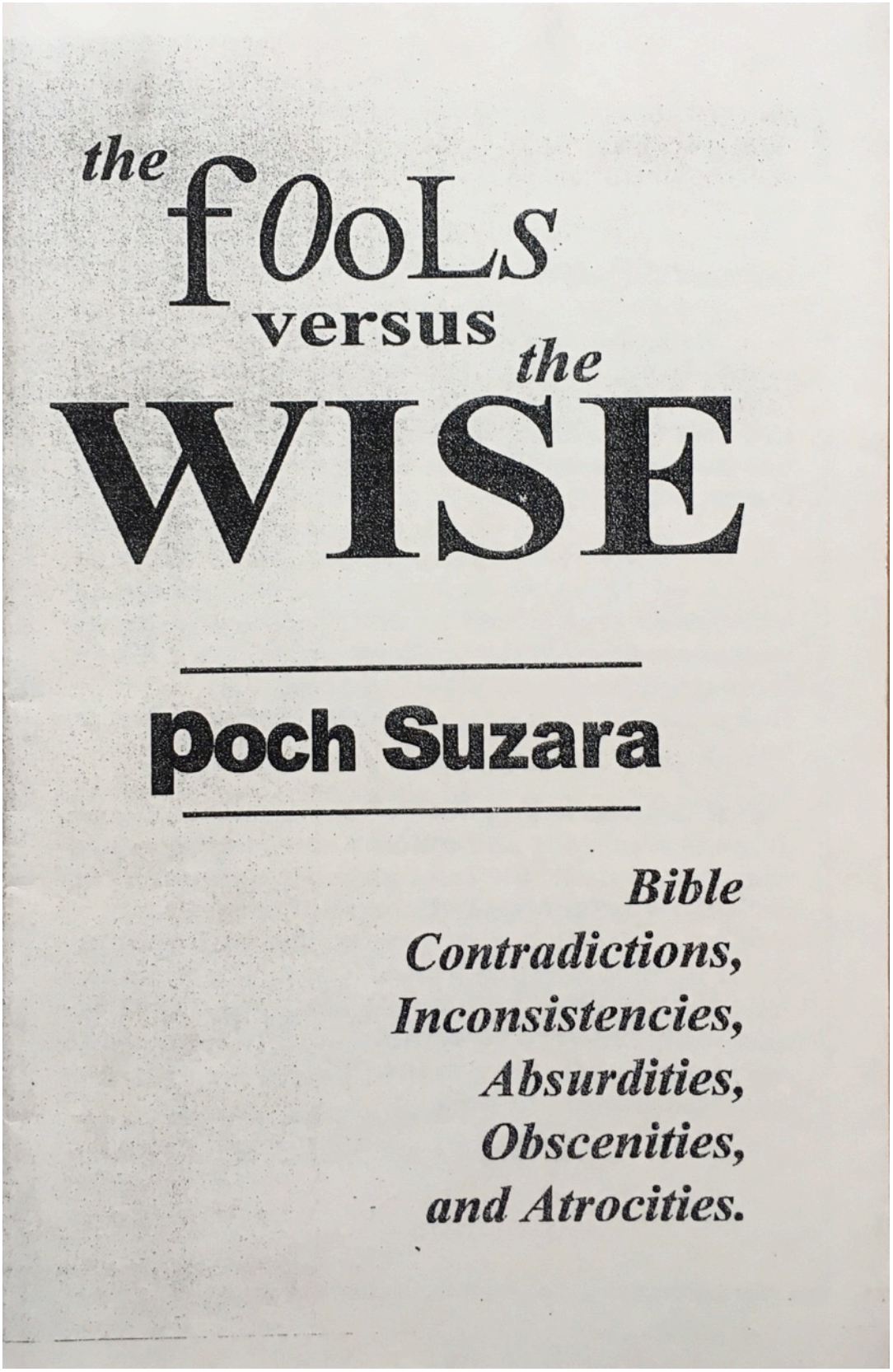


Figure 8: One of the many pamphlets written and published by Poch Suzara.

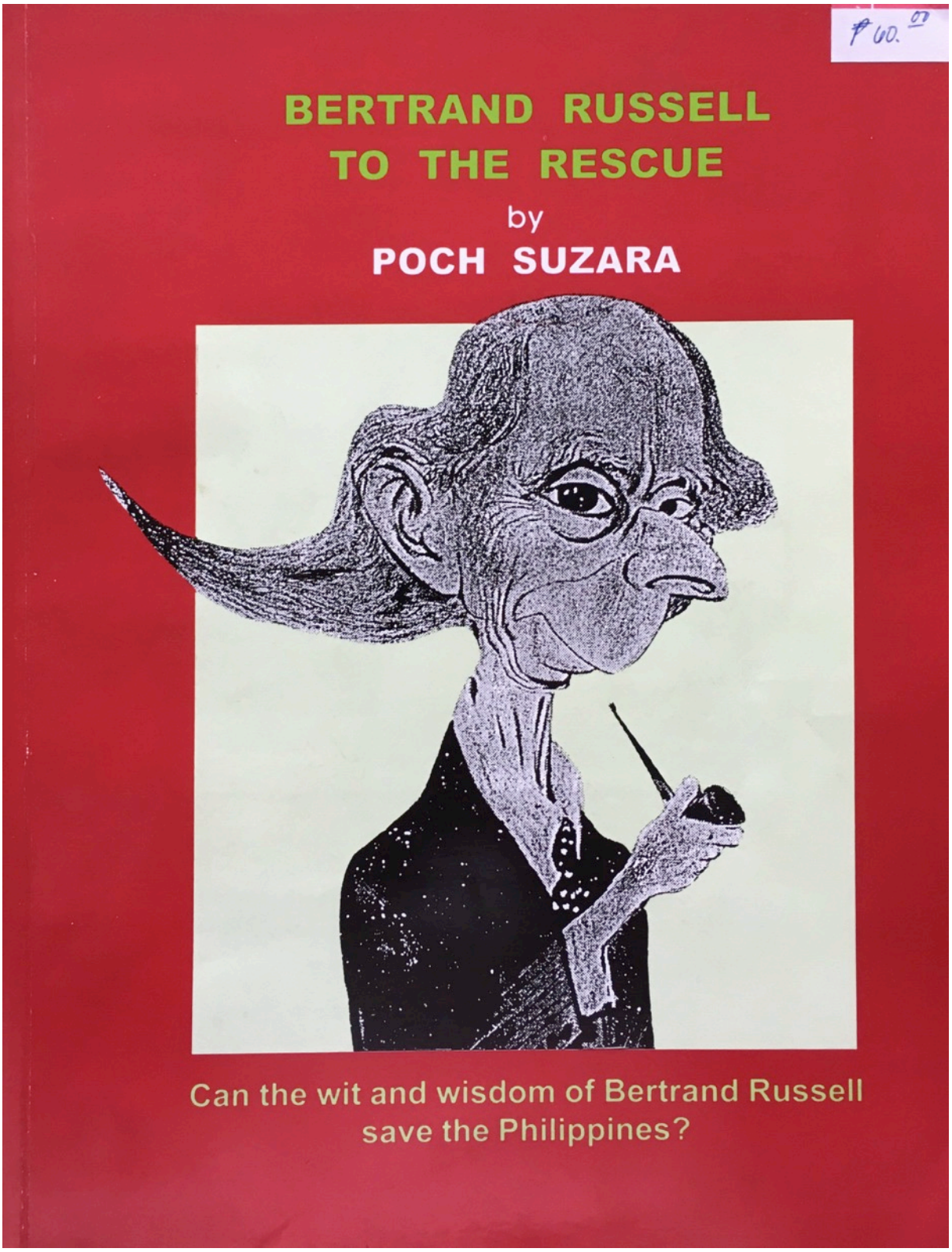


Figure 9: One of the books written and published by Poch Suzara.

Peter Stone, a political scientist at Stanford University, reviewed Suzara's book in *Russell — The Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies*:

> At its best, Suzara's approach can be both entertaining and extremely effective, especially when he is attacking his favorite opponent—organized religion. It makes sense that this cause should be important to him. As Suzara notes at the beginning of the collection, the Philippines is the only Catholic country in Asia, and therefore the only country on the continent plagued by that religion's peculiar foibles (such as its obsessive opposition to birth control). At times, Suzara can be quite good at skewering the perversities caused by the shadow Catholicism casts on Filipino society. (2003, 184)

In a footnote of this review Suzara is mentioned not only as the founder of the Philippine chapter of the BRS, but also as the current chairman of two other groups, the *Philippine Society of Rational Humanists* (PSRH) and the *Enlightenment League and Moral Society* (ELMS). Under the name of the former organization, Suzara and some of his friends published a couple of pamphlets, for example, a leaflet called "What Is a Freethinker?" and a reprint of "An Open Letter to Jesus Christ" by the 19th century American freethinker D. M. Bennett. They had put some of those flyers randomly into books in different bookstores, and also into the bibles lying around in churches. Still, the PSRH as such was more of "a P.O. box thing," as some former activist told me.

In cooperation with the PSRH, the second group, ELMS, appeared as the official publisher of another book authored by Suzara in 1999, "Only in the Philippines" (1999). ELMS was founded by Arthur San Pedro, a former Catholic who had joined the ranks of the "freethinkers" in Rizal Park, where the group also hold its meetings. Aside from these gatherings they had — according to John Paraiso — only one noteworthy activity. At the turn of the millennium, members of ELMS brought together various "Catholic idols," i.e. little religious-themed statues, and smashed them on the streets of Makati in front of the people. This event even got televised, and is described on the website of ELMS, which is still accessible, as "Crushing the idols" under the rubric of "achievements" (ELMS 2008). The group itself, however, dissolved rather quickly since its founder had suffered from a stroke, and, as I was told, eventually became a "believer" again.

In 2003, Suzara began to disseminate his atheist thoughts also online, through his blog "Thoughts to Provoke Your Thoughts," on which until now he has been posting several hundreds of entries. In those short texts titled, for example, "The Harm Done by

Christianity in the Philippines," "Faith Means We Should Live a Life of Fear," "Is God a Supernatural Jerk," or "The Sick Followers of our Sick Pastors," his outrage at religion and the Catholic Church — as reflected in his earlier publications such as the above-mentioned books and pamphlets — still becomes manifest.

The "coffee shop atheists" in Makati

Every Sunday morning, as I have mentioned before, Poch Suzara and a handful of his elderly atheist friends — like him, all in their sixties or seventies — meet over coffee somewhere around the Greenbelt shopping mall complex in Makati. After my first meeting with this group of "coffee shop atheists," as John Paraiso called them, I was able to attend several of their small gatherings in 2014, and one in 2016, during which I not only listened to their discussions, but also interviewed almost all of the regular participants.

The meetups usually started at around 9.30am and lasted up to two hours. The conversations included a large variety of topics, from politics to science, from history to economy, and last but not least: religion. In fact, one member once commented seemingly amused about the group's "obsession" with the latter. And while my presence as a researcher who was specifically interested in atheism might have fostered it further, the attendees, all of whom were self-declared nonbelievers, indeed, used to talk a lot about religion. As for most of the other secularist organizations in Manila, also for this small informal group, the issue of secularism and in particular reproductive health (RH) policies constituted important subjects in this regard. A few weeks prior to the official decision about the constitutionality of the corresponding RH Law, for example, one member noticed during a conversation on the relation between overpopulation and poverty with anger and resignation that the bill would be "rotting" in the Supreme Court. Another attendee, who often went to the more provincial areas outside the metropolitan area for business reasons, told us about the many poor and malnourished children there, who would have no access to proper education. They wondered why in particular poor people would be having so many children. According to one member, one of the reasons for this would be the Catholic Church telling the people that the more children they had the more they were blessed and loved by God. Another attendee said that he simply could not understand why the Church and its priests would fight so

vehemently against the implementation of the RH Law. He told us about a man he knew, who had seven children, but who would simply not earn enough money to pay for all of their needs, and certainly not for their proper formal education. He then added tongue-in-cheek, thereby nodding towards Suzara, who regularly organized a small feeding program for children, that instead of food he should rather distribute condoms among them.

All the meetups I attended were very informal, the discussions were not structured in any way, as it is, for example, the case with the meetups of FF and PATAS, which I will describe in more detail in the next chapter.[25] There was a lot of joking about, and mocking of each other, always, however, in a friendly way. Despite some disagreements on different topics that were being discussed, one could feel that all the elderly participants knew and respected each other much. Their Sunday morning gatherings seemed to constitute an important "social" event. While they were still reading and talking a lot about religion and secularism, they were not engaged in any broader atheist activism anymore, at least not to the same degree as some of them had been, for example, through their participation in the afore-mentioned organizations such as the BRS Philippines, PSRH or ELMS.

Figure 10: Author (left) with the "grandfather of atheism in the Philippines," Poch Suzara (third from left) and some of his atheist friends in Makati.

[25] Some of the elderly atheists, including Suzara, knew about FF, or had even attended one of their gatherings themselves.

The Atheist Circle *at the* University of the Philippines (UP)

> I think tuition at the University of the Philippines was about a forth of what we would have had to pay if I had enrolled at La Salle Taft. What, U.P.? Many members of our clan and family friends couldn't believe it. To them, U.P. was nothing but the hell hole of atheism and communism. (Teotico 2012, 174)

Gerardo M. Lanuza, professor of sociology at the *University of the Philippines* (UP), has written one of the very few available scholarly treatments of organized atheism in the country. In his auto-ethnographic essay titled "Youthful Atheism and Self-Stylization: Reflections on the Atheism of the UP Diliman Atheist Circle" (2012), he analyzed the very first explicit atheist group of the Philippines. That this "Atheist Circle" was established at UP might not come as a total surprise, when one considers that this state university has gained a certain public reputation. As the only secular institution among the country's top four universities — the other three are Catholic-run (Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, and the University of Santo Tomas) — UP became "a place viewed as a breeding ground of radicals, Marxists and atheists" (Natividad 2012, 112). Particularly important in this regard had UP's role in the tumultuous years of "martial law," during which activists, especially left-leaning ones, were confronted with severe repression through the regime of president Ferdinand Marcos. At the university numerous protests were staged or initiated by those activists. While skimming through some of the available books about those times, and about the history of UP in general, I found several quotes, in which this image was brought up. The quote of Jack Teotico above, for example, is taken from an edited volume titled "Not On Our Watch — Martial Law Really Happened. We Were There," which features numerous essays from authors, who have personally experienced the Marcos regime, and have taken part in various forms of protest and activism. In another book, "The Manila We Knew," the editor Erlinda Enriquez Panlilio remembers how she got into UP as a young girl. In her essay "UP Beloved" she writes:

> I shivered as I waited my turn to be examined at the Infirmary of the University of the Philippines in Diliman. Feeling violated, I wanted to jump out of the queue to put on my clothes! I was fifteen and had just graduated from high school at St. Theresa's in San Marcelino, an all-girls' Catholic school run by strict Belgian nuns. They told us that this 'atheistic' university was anathema to good Catholic girls, and warned us about losing our virtue. (Panlilio 2006, 71)

The reputation of UP being a university of activists, as well as "godless" and "atheistic" still seems to carry on to this day. For instance, when I told one of the atheist members of FF — who had graduated from UP himself — that for the time of my research on atheism in the Philippines I would stay at the international guesthouse on the Diliman campus of UP, he said: "You're in the right place!" At UP, during my pre-study stay I was introduced to one of the faculty members of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy as a researcher interested in "atheism." He told me that atheists certainly constituted only a minority in the country, but that I would probably find most of them here, *inside* UP. On another occasion, I was walking across the campus together with my official host at the UP Anthropology Department when we incidentally bumped into some of his colleagues. As soon as they heard about my research project on "nonbelievers" in the Philippines one of them shouted amused: "Ah, that's us!" Later, after I had come back to Manila for my longer fieldwork, during which I stayed again at UP Diliman, I got used to take regular walks around the huge campus that spans almost 500 hectares. One afternoon, while passing by one of the two churches that had been established there — not without stirring up controversy though —, I noticed some colored posters taped along the sidewalk. They had been put there by some of the religious groups, who were active within UP. The posters stated: "Some people say that UP is godless… Let's prove them wrong!" (see figure 11)

The above-mentioned Filipino sociologist Lanuza once called UP a "bastion of moral liberalism, political radicalism, and academic freedom" (2000, 21) — an environment that proved to be the right one for the "subculture of the unbelievers" (9) as he put it. The *UP Atheist Circle*, also known as "UPaC," was founded there in 1996, and although the group has been officially "disbanded," and thus inactive for quite some time — since "most of the members graduated, moved out of the University, and pursued individual careers" (Lanuza 2012, 79) —, there is still a Facebook page, where some more recent informal reunions of former members are documented. On the related "Info" site, UPaC is introduced as follows:

> We are an organization of atheists based in the University of the Philippines-Diliman (with chapters in UP Los Banos and UP Manila), comprised of individuals who believe in the supreme value of life and nothing else and that humanity is the measure of all things, and are against any form of institutional dogmatism, obscurantism and bigotry. (UPaC n.d.)

Figure 11: Seen on the streets at UP Diliman, in front of one of the churches built on the campus.

Based on his experiences and memories as a former member of UPaC himself, Lanuza characterized this kind of "youthful atheism, in the context of the university" as "a form of subculture that allows young atheists to grapple with the existential problems of life" (2012, 78). He had been part of the group for several years (from 1998 to 2002), during which the core membership comprised only 12 people, most of whom were males, as Lanuza remarks in his essay (73n2). With regard to its members' rank in the university system, however, the group seemed quite diverse, ranging from instructors to graduate and undergraduate students (79). Nonetheless, the membership was restricted in another way: Only those who succeeded in submitting a paper about their own atheism, which they subsequently had to defend in front of the other members, got officially accepted.

The group held regular discussion meetings, at which according to Lanuza the group's general "relaxed, no rules atmosphere" became manifest: "We would usually start at five in the afternoon, and would end our often heated discussions at past 10 in the evening" (2012, 79). Aside from these rather informal weekly gatherings UPaC members also organized less frequent, but bigger and more official events. These symposiums under the slogan of "Coffee and God" were open to a broader audience, i.e. non-members, and — since UPaC was an officially registered student organization within UP — were held inside university facilities. The discussions at each symposium centered around a specific theme, respectively. In 2002, for example, the topic was: "To Spit or to Swallow — A Discussion on Cultural and Religious Tolerance of the UP Atheists' Circle." (see figure 12) In 2003 — according to Lanuza the very last official symposium of UPaC — the theme was: "Atheism and the Struggle for Cultural Recognition."

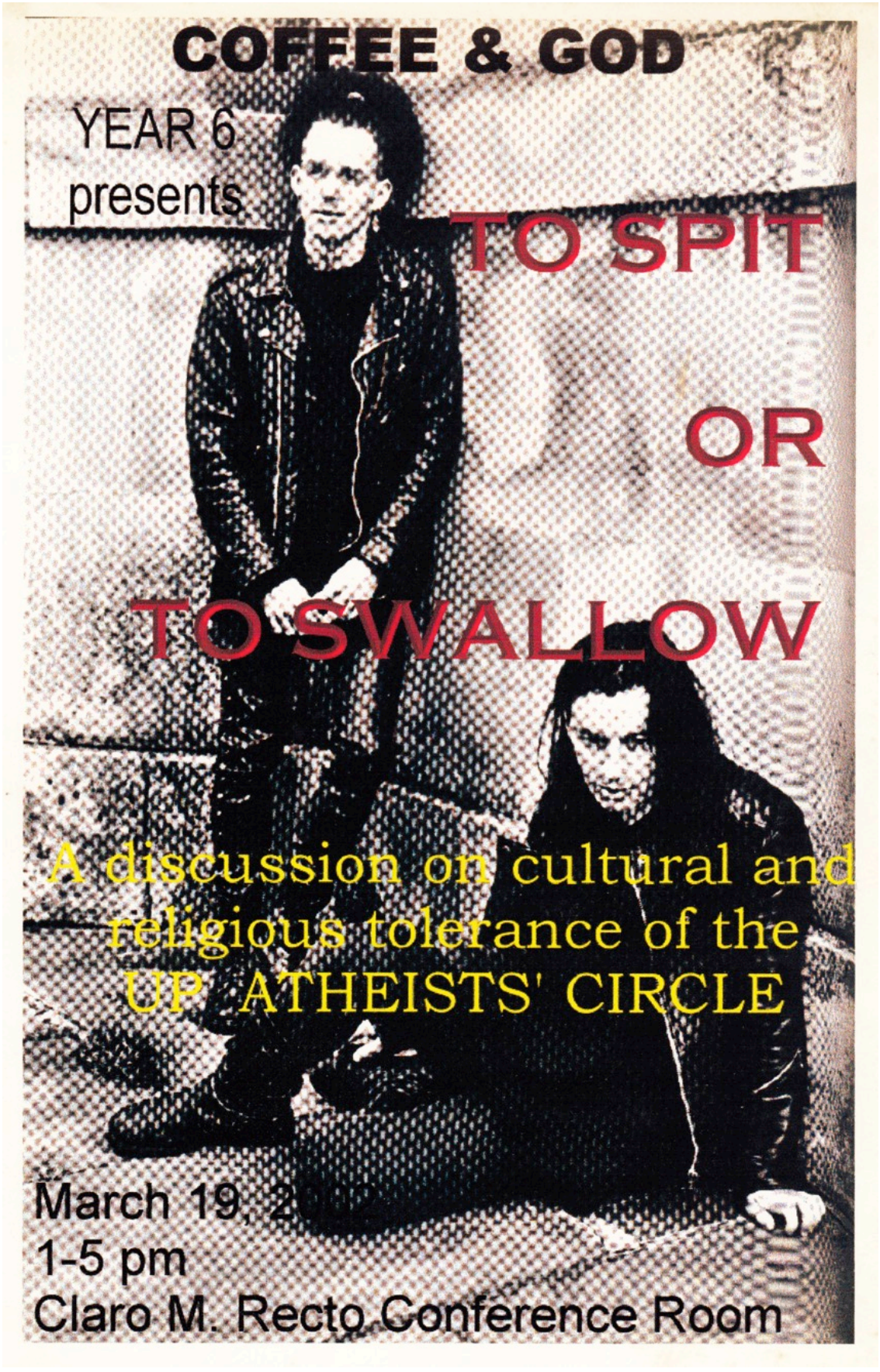


Figure 12: A poster of the *University of the Philippines Atheist Circle* (UPaC) for one of their "Coffee & God" symposiums on the UP Diliman campus.

Unfortunately, I was not able to meet Lanuza personally during my stay at UP. However, with the help of the above-mentioned FF member, who knew some members of the *Atheist Circle*, I got hooked up with another UPaC member who then connected me via Facebook with several other former members. One of them handed me over some old documents from UPaC — including members' essays, protocols, and posters —, which I was allowed to scan and use for my research. In one of these, a protocol of a so-called "UPaC Congress" held in May 2001, some specific elements of the organization's vision, mission, and objectives, which were apparently being discussed during this meeting, are declared. They seem to give quite a good sense of some of the group's main issues back then. Under the section "What must be the vision of UPaC?" one reads, for example, "A country of concerned citizens," "A society free of all forms of discrimination, bigotry and dogmatism," and "A government of dynamic political pluralism, justice and equality." Under "What must be the mission of UPaC?" the protocol states, among some other things, "Change the world," "Discourse with religious people," and "Involvement in socio-political affairs." And, finally, under "What must be the objectives of UPaC?" it is said "To foster deep love of life," and "To promote liberal ideas, diverse belief systems and heterogeneous lifestyles based on the principle of intellectual pluralism and identity differences."

The 2000s

As for the formation of the contemporary secular movement at large, the internet has played a crucial role also for secularist and atheist groups in the Philippines. While there have been numerous individual blogs of Filipino atheists — many of which have disappeared already —, and online group forums on different platforms, there is one blog that truly stands out and which I will introduce in this section: "The "Pinoy Atheist." As I will illustrate in the next chapter, for both PATAS and FF the importance of the internet and particularly social media such as Facebook cannot be overstated. In my interviews with members of these groups about their individual trajectories to nonbelief, this further became clear by the fact that many of my interlocutors got to know about the existence of secularist organizations only through such online channels. The internet also made it much easier to establish transnational connections with like-

minded groups around the world. This becomes manifest, for example, in the Philippine chapter of the US-based *Center for Inquiry* (CFI), which was established in Manila in 2008 and which I will describe in the second part of this section. Even though this group did not last long, it represents another milestone in the history of organized atheism and secularism in the country.

John Paraiso: "The Pinoy Atheist"

> Pinoy Atheist… he's a Filipino who doesn't believe in the existence of a god or gods. In a nation who is supposed to be 'one of the largest Christian nation in Asia,' what is he doing here?

With these words the reader is introduced to one of the earliest, well-known blogs about atheism in the Philippines. Created in 2005, "PINOY ATHEIST: My journey as a Filipino atheist living in Manila" (http://atheistangpinoy.blogspot.com, site discontinued) is in this regard also one of the most active online platforms run by an individual. John Paraiso, whom I have mentioned already several times as a longterm local atheist activist, and who is now in his forties, has posted hundreds of articles on the site until 2013, and is still adding new entries on a more or less regular basis on his new, follow-up blog (http://thepinoyatheist.blogspot.com). At first, however, John had founded the online group "Radioactive Atheist" together with Jobert Cuevas, and a guy called Alexi. According to John it was mainly students of the Adamson University in Manila, some of whom were "anarchists" hanging around in Rizal Park. The group, established in November 2001 on Yahoo, eventually "evolved into the Pinoy Atheist." "The Pinoy Atheist then was created in Friendster," as John stated further on a Facebook post, before it "was turned into a blog in the early part of 2000" (Paraiso 2014).

I personally met John for the first time at an event titled "Atheist Aware," at which the participants were invited to talk about the popular book "The God Delusion" by the atheist author Richard Dawkins. John was one of the organizers, and also moderated the discussion among the 30 attendees. (see chapter 5) This was actually one of the first larger events that he helped to set up since he had withdrawn himself from any atheist group activities a while ago. One could easily notice, however, that despite some disappointing experiences in this regard, John was still an atheist activist to the core. He passionately supported my research by reconstructing the history of atheism in Manila with some help by his longterm friends, by bringing me to the debates in Luneta, where

some of the elderly, "veteran" atheists — some of whom have been participating there for decades — agreed to be interviewed, by introducing me to Poch Suzara, and last but not least by readily allowing me to interview himself more than once.

Before John became a nonbeliever, he had been a very religious person. "Well, I was once a Catholic, because I was born a Catholic," he told me, but later he became a Born-Again Christian, and at that time was even teaching the Bible, "Evangelical-type Christianity, you know, the real hardcore Biblical stuff." "In the middle of that," John continued, "I became agnostic, then I became an atheist, and then I left the Church, because it's really bad teaching the Bible, yet you don't believe in it anymore." Back then he considered himself a "full-fledged atheist." All that happened around college. "Because when I was young, I really loved watching scientific things," he told me, "scientific programs on TV, but that did not made me an atheist right away. I became an atheist gradually, while I was teaching Bible school." As he told me later in the conversation, reading the Bible was one of the main reasons for becoming an atheist, "because if you're going to read the Bible, and going to read the stories in the Bible, without any pastors or priests telling you what to read, you will be given a different picture of God." John regarded the flooding of the world, for example, or also the killing of numerous people, about which he got to read in the Bible a lot, as a stark contradiction to the benevolence and powerfulness that the Christian "God" was normally attached with. "What he did" John said about this Biblical God, "is slaughter here, slaughter there." He started to laugh, and added: "Who's going to read the Bible, will be disgusted." "What kind of a God is that?" John had asked himself back then, and eventually, as he told me, "I lost faith in the book, I lost faith in Christianity." (Interview with John Paraiso, Manila, 2014) However, he not only delved deeply into the scripture, which he still knows very well up to this day, but also informed himself about various other religions, and philosophical issues. As Villamin, who had interviewed John as well back in 2007 or 2008 for her master thesis, wrote: "John could be well applauded because of his ability to tell verbatim Bible errancies and to spot contradictions and inconsistencies not only in religious arguments but also in atheistic arguments. In just an hour, John can tell a whole lot of comprehensive arguments, facts and speculations not only about theism but also about other forms of belief" (2008, 82).

Aside from thoroughly studying the Bible, there were other observations that fueled his doubts about religion. Before he became a Born-Again Christian, John had joined the

Worldwide Church of God, founded in the US by Herbert Armstrong. One day, during one of his visits at the Thomas Jefferson Library in Manila he borrowed a book on American life, in which he incidentally got to read about Armstrong's quarrels with his own son, Garner Ted. John could not believe that the founder of the church that he had held in high esteem, and which he personally was devoted to very much, was fighting with a family member over money issues. He immediately asked his pastors about what he had read in that book, and if it was true. He was left without any real answers. "The next Saturday," John said to me, "I stopped going to church." Later, as a member of a Born-Again church he attended a big church gathering in Pasay, a district of Metro Manila, where he observed the following:

> Outside were kids that don't had any clothes, they were very dirty, and they were running along asking, begging for food. Now members of the church were just going inside the church, they were not giving any-, they don't care about these kids. But they are giving a lot of their money on church tithings, because there is tithing. 10% of their income will go to the church, that's how Born-Again churches here in the Philippines do it. So, they give the 10%, but they're not giving anything to these kids. […] If these churches are teaching people to be good, why are they just giving their money to the church, why are they not giving it to those who really need it? (Interview with John Paraiso, Manila, 2014)

These and other questions added up until he completely lost his faith. Getting involved in the weekend debates at Rizal Park, or Luneta, which I introduced above, was another "turning point" on John's trajectory to atheism, as he his quoted by Villamin (2008, 101). It was there where he could exchange ideas and arguments with other people interested in the same questions and issues that he was struggling with. Officially, he was still a Born-Again Christian when he started to join the discussions, John told me. Back then he still thought he was the only one around, who had stopped believing in God or religion, and thus out of fear he refrained from telling anyone about it — in fact, quite a common narrative of the Filipino atheists I spoke to. According to John, the terms "atheism" or "atheist" were not really used among the nonbelievers in Luneta, until he introduced them there. Instead, they were simply calling themselves "freethinkers." He himself got to know about "atheism" only through the internet. John became a regular and enthusiastic debater both online as well as in the park. Further, he was personally involved to different degrees in several of the organizations that are mentioned in this chapter. As I will describe in more detail in chapters 3 and 7, John also

became the co-founder and first president of PATAS, and as such he shaped the group's collective identity and its strategy to a considerable extent.

Joshua Lipana and the Center for Inquiry (CFI) - Philippines

In the 2008 spring issue of its semiannual newsletter, the "Transnational Program" of the US-based *Center for Inquiry* (CFI), probably one of the most well-known atheist organizations worldwide, published a short section on the "Center for Inquiry and the Philippines." Norm R. Allen Jr. (2008), then co-director of the program, wrote about his brother, Dave Allen, who was visiting the archipelago to meet Poch Suzara, the members of the *Bertrand Russell Society of the Philippines*, and a group called the *Philippine Atheists*. "The latter group," as stated in the report, "is strongly influenced by a brilliant 16-year-old student named Joshua Lipana" (7). The picture positioned alongside the text shows Dave Allen hugging the young Lipana who is wearing a shirt with the imprint "Freethinker." Only a few months later, during the summer of 2008, it is him who became the first president and executive director of the official Philippines branch of the CFI. The newly found organization had its own website, where it was described as follows:

> The Center for Inquiry of the Philippines offers an opportunity to put your principles into practice by joining other rationalists to work for positive change in society. In addition, the Philippines Center sponsors social events for freethinkers as well as intellectual programming, and assists with campus outreach. (CFI-PH n.d.)

On September 3, 2008, a report by Lipana (2008a) was published online, where he stated that the group's "current situation is relatively good" and that there is "a membership of 16 and a supporters list of 30." As the main activities of the CFI - Philippines, he mentioned "publishing, speaking out and increasing membership." According to Lipana's "Manila first policy," all these activities were supposed to be focused on the capital region only. He stated that members "must be heavily involved and committed in CFI / Philippine's cause in promoting and defending science, reason and free inquiry." Under the section titled "Challenges," the Catholic Church is identified as "the primary organization which challenges all the goals of CFI." Lipana also laid out his plan called "Joshua's 2 year plan," according to which the membership should be

increased to 200 persons within two years. Further, an official headquarter should be established, secular humanism should be made "a force in Manila," "1 big convention" should be organized, and "the publication of secular literature" should be prioritized. In fact, the successful realization of the latter goal became manifest in the organization's own publication, "The Freethinker's Reader." (see figures 13 and 14) With Lipana as the editor-in-chief, and Dave Allen as the technical assistant, this newsletter-like, black and white-printed magazine was conceptualized as a continuation of the little book that the owner of the Popular Bookstore, Joaquin Po, had published in the early 1990s under the same title. The first issue — comprising twelve pages — featured amongst others an editorial and two short essays, all written by Lipana himself, and an article on Friedrich Nietzsche and his famous proclamation "God is dead" written by John Paraiso, as well as a fictional letter by Poch Suzara addressed to the national hero José Rizal. When I started my research in 2013, copies of this and two more issues — printed in August 2008, November 2008, and April 2009, respectively — were still sold for PHP 20 at its main distributor, the Popular Bookstore in Quezon City. As Lipana remarked in a short post on the CFI Philippines blog: "Popular Bookstore is and will always remain our greatest ally in our goal to further our secular agenda" (2008b). "The Freethinker's Reader" also got recognized by the US-based *Bertrand Russell Society* (BRS) in its former publication, the *BRS Quarterly*, where it was described as follows: "Despite an uneven tone, the newsletter conveys clearly the frustration experienced by embattled secular Filipinos, giving voice to the dismay of atheists and freethinkers living in the Philippines" (BRS 2008). Indeed, the passion for his cause, is clearly noticeable in the general writing style and selection of words by the young editor Lipana, as can be seen in his editorial of the first issue:

> And to our readers I would like to say that the time for change has come. We have the will. We have the power. Change is within our grasp! Join us! And let us crush the infamous thing together! No more will we have crazed terrorists in the south. No more will we have the pious idiots controlling our government! No more! We have sat down for far too long! We must awake from this idleness and reclaim our homeland! Freedom and reason must reclaim supremacy over this chaotic collection of fools who govern us! (2008c)

At the beginning of 2009, Lipana (2009) reported about a "extremely successful" trip to La Union, a region located further in the north of the island of Luzon, where he met with Ian Baltazar, a politician who had become the group's vice-president a few months

earlier. "A La Union branch has officially been opened," Lipana proudly stated in the related blog entry. However, Lipana's enthusiasm for the CFI Philippines seemed to have been rather short-lived. In August 2009, only about one year after the organization's very foundation, he resigned as president and executive director. As one could read on the group's blog:

> When asked to comment on his decision, he stated that "After reading 'Atlas Shrugged' and some other books of Ayn Rand, I've decided that Objectivism[26] is the proper philosophy for me"
>
> Mr. Lipana later added "It would have been disingenuous of me to remain as leader of an organization that has a philosophic foundation based on Secular Humanism, when I no longer am one." (CFI-PH 2009)

Lipana went on to become an assistant editor of the blog of an US-based magazine called *The Objective Standard*, which is presented on its own website as "the preeminent source for commentary from an Objectivist perspective, Objectivism being Ayn Rand's philosophy of reason, egoism, and capitalism."[27] Lipana published numerous articles on the blog until he was diagnosed with cancer in 2012. Despite an online fundraising campaign organized by the editor of "The Objective Standard," Craig Biddle, to financially support Lipana's treatment in Manila, and some temporarily improvement of his condition, he passed away in April 2013 at the early age of 21.

In June 2010, Ian Baltazar (2010), who had served as the Director of CFI Philippines (La Union), had resigned as well, expressing his "disillusionment and displeasure" directed at the CFI headquarters in the US about "the unceremonious firing and shameful treatment of Norm Allen by the present CFI leadership." He further stated that the latter's "termination is a shock to CFI international and a big loss to groups that constantly depend on him for support and assistance particularly humanist, skeptic and freethought organizations in Africa and Asia. Norm Allen is our bridge in an otherwise disinterested CFI leadership ominous in terminating international branches in a matter of months for no apparent reasons" (Baltazar 2010).

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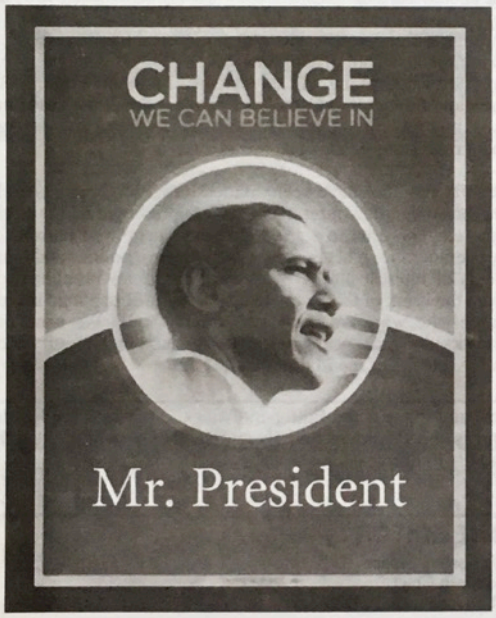
[26] "Objectivism" as a philosophical system is mainly associated with the Russian-American writer Ayn Rand (1905-1982), who developed it in both her fictional and non-fictional work. Propagating, for example, reason, rational self-interest, and *laissez-faire* capitalism, her thoughts have influenced later writers and philosophers, and resulted even in a kind of movement, the so-called "Objectivist movement." Outside the latter, however, Rand's ideas have always remained controversial.

[27] See https://www.theobjectivestandard.com/about-the-objective-standard. Accessed May 24, 2018.

THE FREETHINKER'S READER

VOL. 1 NO. 2 2008

OBAMA'S LECTURE ON FAITH AND SECULARISM



"...In fact, because I do not believe that religious people have a monopoly on morality, I would rather have someone who is grounded in morality and ethics, and who is also secular, affirm their morality and ethics and values without pretending that they're something they're not. They don't need to do that. None of us need to do that...."

"....I was not raised in a particularly religious household, as undoubtedly many in the audience were. My father, who returned to Kenya when I was just two, was born Muslim but as an adult became an atheist. My mother, whose parents were non-practicing Baptists and Methodists, was probably one of the most spiritual and kindest people I've ever known, but grew up with a healthy skepticism of organized religion herself. As a consequence, so did I..."

"...And even if we did have only Christians in our midst, if we expelled every non-Christian from the United States of America, whose Christianity would we teach in the schools? Would we go with James Dobson's, or Al Sharpton's? Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is ok and that eating shellfish is abomination? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount - a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own Defense Department would survive its application? So before we get carried away, let's read our bibles. Folks haven't been reading their bibles..."

(continued on page 10...)

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PHILIPPINES... P20.00 U.S.A....$1.00

Figure 13: Front page of an issue of "The Freethinker's Reader" published by the Center for Inquiry Philippines (CFI-PH) in 2008.

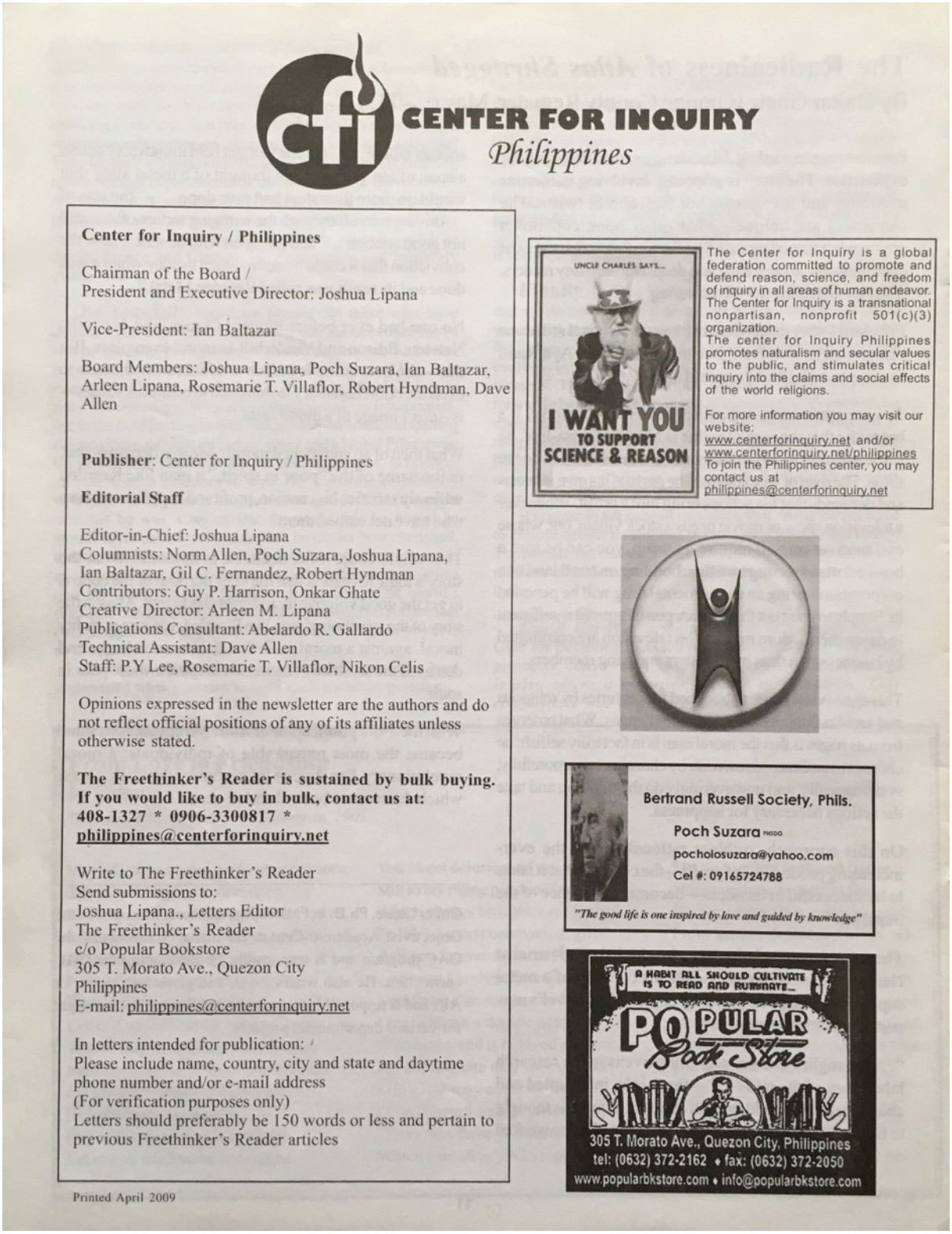

Figure 14: Back page of an issue of "The Freethinker's Reader" published by the Center for Inquiry Philippines (CFI-PH) in 2009.

The 2010s

Before PATAS was created in February 2011, another group had appeared, which turned out, however, as very short-lived: the *Critical Thinking Filipinos* (CTF), also called the C*ritical Thinking Filipinos Humanist Association Community*. According to its former website, which is not accessible anymore, it has been founded on November 27, 2010, as a "philanthropic and humanist foundation, for Filipinos and of Filipinos, learned in applying critical thinking against extraordinary beliefs." As one could further read on the site of the group's official mission and vision statement: "We stand by the truth that religion does not hold a monopoly on ethical and moral behavior. We dedicate our lives to doing goodwill to our fellowmen without the pretext of a supernatural being." On the "About Us" page it was said: "We also call ourselves 'Modern,' 'Liberal,' 'Humanist,' 'Agnostic,' and 'Atheist.'" While there is still a Facebook page of CTF, the group as such got dissolved — or rather, as I was told, it had developed into another organization focused on "animal welfare."

In 2012, a new — or renewed — "freethinking" group called the *Tiger Freethinkers* was established by some students at a famous university located in Metro Manila, which, however, is unlike UP not a secular one, but "the largest Catholic university in the world in a single campus" (UST n.d.) based on its student population. Founded in 1611, the *University of Santo Tomas* (UST) is further considered "the oldest existing university in Asia" (UST n.d.). As I will describe in the following section, such a setting, not surprisingly, confronts self-declared nonbelievers, or "freethinkers" with certain challenges and difficulties. Last but not least, before concluding this chapter, I will briefly mention the most recent manifestation of the secular movement in the Philippines, an organization that came into being only during the second half of my fieldwork in Manila: the *Humanist Alliance Philippines, International* (HAPI).

The Tiger Freethinkers *at the* University of Santo Tomas (UST)

As stated on their website, the *Tiger Freethinkers* (TF) at the renowned Catholic-run *University of Santo Tomas* (UST) have been founded on April 1, 2012, as "the result of the combined effort of Toby Cabug and Ralph Rapadas to revive the old Tiger Freethinkers group." According to its mission, published online as well, the group "aims

in promoting freethought, secularism, and critical thinking among students in the University of Santo Tomas while fixing common misconceptions and educating others about freethought" (TF n.d.). "Freethought" is further defined under the section "Freethought 101" as "a philosophical viewpoint that holds opinions should be formed on the basis of **logic**, **reason**, and **empiricism** and not authority, tradition, or other dogmas" (TF n.d.; original emphasis). While "most people in the group are atheists," as Reynaldo, a self-declared "theist" member of TF told me in an interview, the group as such was not supposed to be an organization exclusively for nonbelievers. At least not anymore. The "old" Tiger Freethinkers group, he said, differed strongly from the "new" group in this regard since "TF before was made for atheists only." Francis, another TF member, who took part in the interview as well and who in contrast to Reynaldo considered himself an atheist, said: "I think the Tiger Freethinker's name of the original group was to just hide the atheism, it was like a euphemism, so others can't label them as atheists." Inside a Catholic university such as UST, which is commonly regarded as very conservative — because, for example, of its official stance *against* the RH Bill/Law —, such an explicit atheist organization would, indeed, be unimaginable. But even with the label "freethinker" and despite its "new" focus it seems still not possible for the TF to be formally recognized and registered as a student organization within the UST administrative body — unlike, for example, the aforementioned *Atheist Circle* of the secular state university UP. At UST, freethinkers would rather feel "restrained" and "restricted," as Reynaldo told me. When I asked Francis on his general thoughts on religion and education in the Philippines, he spoke from his own experiences and about his current situation as an atheist college student at a religious institution:

> It's hard for people who are nonreligious to find a school that caters to their beliefs — or nonbeliefs. Because for me, I applied in UP, [but] I failed. I applied to Ateneo, which is a bit more open compared to UST, I got wait-listed […] so my third option was UST. I really didn't want to come into UST, but it was just more of, where do I want the best education, for me, I just viewed it as something that came with my personal want to have a good education. It's just collateral damage to me, for me to suffer religious discrimination for, because UST is a religious school, it's a Catholic school. (Interview with TF member, Manila, 2014)

He further told me that "if you want a secular school, it's going to be a really hard time finding one… so, yah, I feel really suppressed, because I don't have freedom of choice, I just have freedom of choice between schools that are religious." Then he said: "Well, for

me, and other young atheists I met at PATAS, our main target is UP." At UP, the well-known state and official secular university I introduced above, the students' religious backgrounds, or the lack thereof, doesn't matter much, as Francis explained to me, "unlike Ateneo, La Salle, and here in UST, because they really require you to going to mass, to take subjects that you don't really want, and for me as an atheist and as a Filipino I view it as a waste of time…" He added: "Of course, it's not a waste of time for others, but for me personally, if I had the choice to not take those subjects, and to not, and to not pay tuition for those subjects, I would, because I really don't think that it caters to my needs as a student, and as a young adult, ehm, I don't really think that it has much effect on my adult life, in my job, so I just really think that it's a waste of time."

I had met Francis for the first time at a PATAS meetup, where we shortly talked about TF and where he agreed to inform me about any of their upcoming meetups or activities. In March 2014 I was able to attend an informal meetup of the group, which was held inside the gated campus of UST. As I was told, there had been no official meetups in a while since most of the core members of the group were already in their third year of college, which due to the high study load and the preparation for the final exams they jokingly called "the hell year." Thus, one of the main issues that members talked about — not only at the meetup itself, but also in my interview with Reynaldo and Francis a few days later — was simply the survival of the group. Before they became too busy, however, TF members had organized several meetups, including, for example, so-called "lecture meetups" with talks and discussions, some of which were hosted in a coffee shop nearby. If there was no presentation at the respective meetup, they engaged in previously selected, and announced topics, or held a kind of "open forum," where attendees could bring up their own topics. The first official meetup of the revived TF group though had been a disappointment for the organizers due to the small number of participants — "only three people were there" as Reynaldo and Francis laughingly told me. However, already the second meetup turned out to be a success and the subsequent gatherings saw the attendance of a relatively stable group of 10 to 15 people — sometimes even more than 20. At the meetups' beginning everyone was asked to share his or her "belief system," which was done also at the small unofficial "meetup" that I and only five more persons were attending. This procedure is also part of every meetup organized by both FF and PATAS, as I will describe in more detail in the next chapter. In fact, FF and PATAS were somewhat considered as the "mother groups"

of TF. Due to the perceived "militancy" of PATAS with regard to its propagation of atheism — something I will talk about more in chapter 5 —, TF members, however, eventually "turned down" any official affiliations with PATAS. Yet, there was another group that I was told about, the "Iskola Freethinkers" of the *University of the City of Manila* (PLM), whose members had regularly participated at the TF meetups, not least because of their own group's instability. At the beginning TF even had appointed "officers," such as a secretary, or an event coordinator. When they got too busy with their studies in 2013, they just tried to keep the group alive by at least posting stuff on their Facebook forum. As one of the attendees at the aforementioned informal gathering of TF himself nicely put it tongue-in-cheek — while we were talking about earlier like-minded organizations, most of which had already disappeared —, such groups are sometimes like *ningas kugon*.[28] When I later asked him on Facebook about the exact meaning of this Tagalog phrase, he told me: "It means that people are only active and passionate with their jobs at the start. There's huge hype but nothing comes afterwards" (TF member, Facebook message to author, April 15, 2014).

The Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI)

Marissa Langseth, who had founded PATAS in February 2011 together with John Paraiso, left the group at the end of 2013. She went on to establish another group, the *Humanist Alliance Philippines, International*, or HAPI, on December 25, 2013. The group's activities started at the beginning of 2014, i.e. only in the second half of my fieldwork, and I thus decided to not focus much on this "spin-off" organization of PATAS, as one activist had called it. Still, I attended two of the monthly meetups of HAPI, in April and May 2014, and interviewed the group's first president, Alvin C. Dakis, a self-declared agnostic who had been very much engaged in the issue of reproductive health (RH) rights. During one of the meetups I participated in, HAPI was characterized as "an organization for social change and community development." And, in fact, activities in local communities, such as feeding programs became one of the group's cornerstones later on.

With regard to its collective positioning towards religion, which was enthusiastically

[28] The Tagalog word kugon refers to a particular type of grass called "cogon grass." According to the online dictionary "Tagalog Lang" the phrase ningas kugon means "quickly going up in flames." Its literal translation would be "flaming cogon grass." See https://www.tagaloglang.com/kugon/.

discussed at the meetup as well, it was said that the group should strive to achieve a "middle ground." While "humanism" would stand for the realization and maximization of human potential *without* drawing on the concept of a god or the supernatural, there were also some "religious" members in the group. However, all of them claimed to support political "secularism." As further written on the official website of HAPI, the group "is a not-for-profit community of progressive secular humanists" (HAPI n.d.), and is officially affiliated with international like-minded groups such as the *American Humanist Association* (AHA), the *Institute for Science and Humanist Values* (ISHV), or the umbrella organization *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU). As the founder of HAPI and as a longterm secular and atheist activist, Marissa Langseth is featured in a short video interview on the website, and also in two books published by the *Humanist Press*.

CONCLUSIONS

As stated at the outset of this chapter, most of the protagonists, groups, and places I have described in the sections above, are somehow connected to each other as well as to FF and PATAS. For instance, I met the president of the *Tiger Freethinkers* (TF) at a meetup of PATAS; I was asked during an interview with a FF member if I had already met Poch Suzara and John Paraiso, both of whom had previously attended FF meetups themselves; the founder of HAPI was the co-founder and former chairwoman of PATAS, and HAPI's first president had given a lecture on the issue of RH at the "Humanism Conference" organized by PATAS; I was told that if CTF still existed, there would be no PATAS, and that UPaC members once had teamed up with the members of ELMS; several PATAS members had formerly joined, or are still participating in the weekly debates at Luneta etc. These are only a few examples, the list, in fact, could go on. It might not come as a surprise that not all of such connections have taken the form of friendly and cooperative relationships. As any other social movement, also the secular movement in the Philippines — as well as beyond — is shaped by internal fractures and secessions, quarrels between different groups and individuals, or the regular dissolution of old, and the creation of new organizations. One activist, who had withdrawn from any group activities for quite a while since he got disillusioned,

sarcastically described the situation of organized atheism in Manila as "a pissing contest." According to him one of the main reasons for this was simply the "tribal" nature of Filipinos. While, in fact, I did get to know some of the past and present issues between certain groups, and while I think it is, indeed, important to mention, and to keep in mind that such conflicts do exist, my intention is not to contribute to, or to reproduce them by disclosing any further details. Rather, I would like to put those disputes and disagreements among secularists in the Philippines in a different light: "A social movement open to internal antagonism is a movement that is active, not fractured" (Cimino and Smith 2010, 155).

After the kind of "aerial gazing" that this chapter has provided, it is now time to go into "underwater swimming," as the anthropologist Katharine Wiegele put it in her own ethnographic study in the nation's capital, since "[m]oving between these perspectives […] is ultimately what an ethnographer is expected to do: to map a phenomenon such as a social movement both through generalizing and through fluent navigation through particulars on the ground" (2005, 61). In the following chapter I will thus describe such "particulars on the ground" by looking more closely at FF and PATAS. As mentioned earlier, during the time of my fieldwork from August 2013 to May 2014 they were by far the biggest and most active secularist organizations in Manila.

Chapter 3

The *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF) & the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS)

Foundational Histories, Organizational Structures, and Activities

For both groups FF and PATAS I will describe in the following sections some elements of what the historian Edward Royle (1980) called the "anatomy of freethought" in his study of the secularist movement in late 19th century Great Britain: their foundational histories, key figures, and organizational structures, as well as their agenda and main activities. This gives the necessary contextual background for the remaining chapters of my thesis.

My initial access to, and my integration into both groups as a researcher turned out to be fairly easy. In fact, as I was told, there had been several other students before, who likewise conducted some research and interviewed members of FF and PATAS for their undergraduate theses.[29] Of course, like in every ethnographic endeavor, there are people, with whom one gets along better than with others, and some members of FF, PATAS, or the other like-minded groups in Manila, were more open to speak with me about their experiences as nonbelievers, while others remained rather skeptical about my presence. That said, to strike up a conversation at the meetups, and especially during the post-meetup gatherings, which I will describe in more detail in this chapter, or at any other event organized by both organizations wasn't difficult at all. Some members seemed to be as interested in my views and opinions as a foreign visitor as I

[29] One student from UP, the university I was affiliated with, even attended a few meetups of both groups at the same time I was there as well. Aside from me suffering for a few days from the so-called "my tribe" syndrome commonly known among anthropologists, this had no real consequences for the both of us since our methodological approaches, the research questions, and the disciplinary backgrounds had been quite different (see Astudillo 2014).

was in theirs. About my own stance on religion, however, I was — to my surprise — not inquired much, except at some of the introduction rounds at the regular meetups of FF and PATAS, where all participants are asked — or are given the chance — to position themselves in this regard.

There were some expectations regarding my research project, including, for example, the hope that it would somehow help one of the central causes of secularist groups such as FF and PATAS, which I described in the introduction: the "normalization" of nonbelief in a society considered to be overly religious. As one FF member explicitly told me in an interview:

> I hope that this study would be able to, would be published like in every university, in our schools, so that they would be aware of the existence of a very tiny, tiny small majority of the population that I believe is capable of thinking outside the box, and be embraced and be heard instead of being marginalized and discriminated.

Although my research project cannot be regarded as "activist" anthropology in any broader sense, I would be happy if it could contribute in some ways to the deconstruction of stereotypes about atheists and nonbelievers, and could foster a constructive dialogue between secular activists, the academe, and the wider public. Another expectation that was raised, or implicitly uphold, was the idea that my ethnographic research could show possibilities for "improving" the organizations as such — an expectation that it simply can't, and is also not meant to fulfill.

Aside from such more concrete projections, however, I was in general not at all confronted, or questioned by members of FF and PATAS about my intentions, and my interest in them. On several occasions I was simply asked about any preliminary findings of my research, or about my own thoughts on the differences between the two groups. Such questions, while they were thrown at me with real, or empathic curiosity, always put me at some unease. Not only because I did not want to get involved in any intergroup dynamics, or tensions, but also because — in particular at the beginning of my research — the focus of my research was not yet totally clear even to myself.

Another short remark is necessary at this point: for both groups I do not have any official numbers regarding their actual membership, or detailed demographic information, e.g. about the group members' gender, age, or socio-economic background.

Regarding the issue of gender, however, I would say that based on my own impressions both FF and PATAS are to a very large extent *male-dominated*. This, in fact, resembles the statistics, or evaluations of similar groups in other contexts, for example, in the UK, the US, or Germany, as well as in non-Western contexts such as India (Quack 2012a: 46, 156-159). This dominance of male members was a bit less visible in the case of FF, who succeeded to attract some, albeit only a few, female members, and meetup participants. Still, one member referred at least to the early gatherings of FF tongue-in-cheek as a "sausage fest." One of the core members of FF also brought up the issue of the general gender imbalance within secularist groups in one of our conversations himself, and asked me about my own thoughts about the reasons for it, and what could be done in this regard (I had no satisfiable answer to his questions, but I pointed out the fact that this gender imbalance was indeed a characteristic of like-minded groups worldwide).

Even though PATAS was co-founded by a woman, and the core members had elected another woman as the organization's president in 2013, in general the group seemed even more male-dominated. On one occasion a local activist further referred to PATAS as a group of mainly "old" males. While some of the core members at the time of my fieldwork actually were already in their forties, or fifties, there were also a lot of younger ones, including some minors, i.e. members who were below the age of 18. On average, however, the core members of FF appeared to me slightly younger than the ones of PATAS, since most of the former were in their twenties or thirties.

Both groups' Facebook pages count several thousand followers, respectively. But only around 30 people attend each group's regular meetup, sometimes less, i.e. around 20, sometimes more, i.e. up to 40 participants. Aside from such numbers, it is, however, hard, or even impossible to estimate how many *actual* "members" FF and PATAS have. After presenting some disparate numbers about organized secularism in the United States, Cragun and Manning remind the reader about the particular situation and structure of secularist groups there, which characterizes also the ones located in the Philippines:

> All social movements have varied constituencies. There are core members […] — those who are actively involved in the day-to-day activities of the various social movement organizations. Then there are the members who support the movement – often financially, but potentially in other ways – and are involved when they can be. There is also a sympathetic public – individuals who would support the movement but are either not aware of it, too busy with other things,

> or simply free-riding (i. e., getting the benefits from the social movement without doing any of the work). Finally, there is the unsympathetic public, or those who actually oppose the aims of the movement. (2017, 5)

"Reason, science, and secularism" — the *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF)

A FF meetup is scheduled for tomorrow! I am sitting in front of my laptop in the apartment that I have rented on the campus of UP for my short pre-study visit in Manila in April 2013. My research project was supposed to focus solely on PATAS as a contemporary example of organized atheism in the Philippines. However, during these last days I had started to think a lot about whether to include FF as a "freethinking" group as well, even though I had not yet tried to contact them, unlike as in the case of PATAS. I was browsing through the FF website and just discovered that they will be gathering on the next day. Very excited about it, I immediately start to write a long and sophisticated message on my mobile phone to the number posted below the announcement. I introduce myself as a PhD student from Germany and as part of a research project at the University of Frankfurt/Main about various forms of "nonreligion" in different countries. Since my own research was focused on the Philippines, I would be keen to participate in tomorrow's meetup and very interested in getting to know the members of FF etc. After revising the message several times, I finally press the "send" button of my device. I am wondering about how they would respond to my inquiry, if at they would at all. Will they be skeptical about a foreign researcher interested in their discussions? Will they allow me to attend? Fortunately, I do not have to wait very long until the beeping signal of an incoming message fills the small room. I grab my phone, open the mail, and start to read: "Sure, come over!"

As simple and straightforward as their three-word reply was my further integration and acceptance as a curious anthropologist determined to stay with the group and observe its members' activities for almost a year. It will become clear in the following sections that this easygoing-like character of my first interactions with FF members is to some extent also reflected in their general attitude and handling of things, as well as in their rather non-hierarchical organizational structures.

Foundation[30]

"I had sex with Red, and then FF came out!"

(The wife of Red Tani during the introduction round at a FF meetup)

One can, of course, only speculate about the actual influence of their joint activities, what his wife's tongue-in-cheek version of the origin of FF quite accurately pointed out, however, is the indisputable fact that FF is the "baby" of Red. Red Tani, whom I mentioned in the introduction, had graduated from De La Salle University, which is one of the most popular and well-known universities in Manila. He is now in his mid-thirties and runs a web-development company, together with his wife. In our interview, which took place at his home about one week prior to the 5th anniversary of FF on February 1, 2014, I asked him about how it came that he founded the group back then. He told me that after returning from a job in Indonesia he used to spend his Friday nights with a couple of friends, whom he invited over to his place, "and we would find ourselves staying up late, like into the wee hours of the morning, just talking about things like religion, philosophy." Enjoying these conversations very much, Red wondered if there were any bigger, more formalized discussion groups in Manila, where he could share and discuss his thoughts and interests, so he started to look for it online. "[T]he closest that I found was the atheist groups," he remembered, "there were two or three at the time, mostly mailing lists." Red, himself being an atheist since 2007, had grown up as a devout Catholic: "I was even a member of 'Youth for Christ' back in college," but later in his first job, which gave him lots of free time that he used to read various stuff on his digital tablet, he was confronted with "the idea that Christianity borrowed its mythology from pagan traditions." He thus began to research more about Christianity's history, about "the dark past of the Catholic Church and the crusades and inquisitions and how their being the predominant religion of the world has nothing to do with their being the correct religion… it's just a matter of how well they have fought throughout history." With these doubts about Christianity's universalistic claims, Red at first became interested in other religious traditions like Kabbala, Sufism or Zen-Buddhism. He tried to believe and practice elements of different religions, "because back then I had a belief that all religions had some part of the truth, you know, or the perennial truth that Aldous Huxley was writing about. And, you know, to understand religion, […], you'd

[30] The quotes in this section are taken from my personal interview with Red, unless otherwise stated.

have to get a piece of it from all of these other belief systems." "So I got into New Age," Red told me, "the New Age world-views, New Age or New Thought, and I really liked it." He pointed towards two big boxes on top of the shelf behind him, smiled, and said: "Those are filled with books, New Age books." But even though he delved deeply into the New Age literature, regarded the whole mythology as very self-consistent and was even able to discuss and debate with anyone who might have asked him about it, "there was something that was missing." The "failing of it was empirical. Like you couldn't proof those things. And when I read about the philosophy of needing more than reason to back up your arguments, needing empirical evidence, needing science, when I read those philosophers, that made more sense to me." Inspired by rationalists like Bertrand Russell, or Robert Ingersoll, Red realized that he "became a rational freethinker, or rather a scientific freethinker". "And I had to drop the notion that you could reconcile all religions, because by then I found out that they weren't consistent at all. Like they contradicted each other, if one was right, others would be wrong. And I just figured out that they were probably all wrong, and that's when I became a secular humanist, became a naturalist, and that's the end of my journey," he said, "I'm still there."

Even though Red had always been "pretty vocal" with his family about his journey through all those different beliefs, which eventually led to his unbelief, things got heated up when he confronted his extended family with an essay by Dan Barker, co-president of the well-known US-based *Freedom From Religion Foundation* (FFRF). As Red wrote in an article on the FF website, being tired of "religious chain letters" circulating around his family's mailing list, he had decided that "the mailing list needed a more rational perspective" (Tani 2011b). "The essay" of Dan Barker, which he forwarded to his relatives on the list, "*criticized religion* with logical arguments, meticulous research, and hard evidence." (Tani 2011b; italics in the original) However, as Red further stated: "Most of my relatives were lost at 'criticized religion'" (Tani 2011b). Dan Barker "should be ignored," they said, "because he was an atheist" (Tani 2011b). "But I'm also an atheist," Red replied to his family members. And hence, he "was told that I was wasting my intelligence, that I should not argue with my elders because this was disrespectful" (Tani 2011b). The discussion eventually stopped a few days later without any final conclusion and Red was left unsatisfied. He felt being ignored, since "I still had thoughts that I needed to share, and my family wasn't the group I could share them with" (Tani 2011b). Red immediately felt at "home" when he found the afore-mentioned atheist

mailing lists online: "[U]nlike in the family mailing list, this was the kind of discussion that I needed. Although I was a newbie, they focused on what I said rather than who I was. Arguments were met with counter-arguments, and it was obvious that these people placed merit on reason; they took nothing on authority, tradition, or faith" (Tani 2011b). However, he was quite disappointed when he found out that the members of these atheist mailing lists rarely met in person and when they did, like maybe once a year, then "only a handful would show up" (Tani 2011b). Unsatisfied with this situation, and looking for something like the Friday night gatherings he used to have with his friends, Red initiated a discussion with the mailing list members about having more face-to-face interactions. Finally, he was able to convince the "gate-keepers of that online-community" and thus, on February 1, 2009, the very first official meetup took place. In total, 26 people came together at Starbucks in Shangri-La Mall, a shopping mall located at Ortigas Center, a famous business district in Mandaluyong, which is one of the cities comprising the metropolitan area. Compared to the small gatherings that previously had happened only occasionally, it was considered as a huge success. The very same night, Red told me, they created a new mailing list group, the "Filipino Freethinkers." Aside from forming "a good alliteration" with "Filipino," the term "Freethinker" was meant to be an umbrella term, since not all people who showed up at the meetup labelled themselves as "atheists:" "[T]here were agnostics, there were deists, pantheists, some religious people there, so we couldn't use the word 'atheist' fairly to represent everyone in the group." Still, one of the initial main reasons for this new group was to overcome the differences and difficulties that had split the aforementioned atheist mailing lists, which formerly had constituted only "one big group," and to bring together all of their members.

Red has been the face of FF ever since. He was interviewed several times, received an award for being a "digital trailblazer," and even appeared on TV. Further, he himself published not only numerous articles on the official website of FF, but also in one of the largest English-speaking national newspapers, the "Philippine Daily Inquirer." In many of my interviews and informal conversations it became clear that Red is not only admired and hold in highest regards by members of his own organization, but that he is, in fact, very much respected for his advocacy also by many of the activists from other like-minded groups in Manila.

Organizational structures

There is no formal membership in FF. Everyone who wants to be part of the organization can just join the meetups, and easily leave the group at any time. While thus the fluctuation of participants might be quite high, there still remains a "core" group of long-time and/or very active members, who invest a lot of personal time and effort to keep things running. Several of these core members are assigned to specific positions within the group and referred to with corresponding official titles, such as "Reproductive Health Advocacy Director," or "Affiliations Director." During the time of my research, Kenneth Keng, for example, held the former, while Garrick Bercero held the latter position. This, however, came out of particular circumstances, as Garrick told me:

> We have our formal titles as 'Advocacy Directors' and whatever, mainly because when we got more involved with the reproductive health advocacy, they would ask Kenneth like: 'Oh, what's your position in FF?' (…) We didn't really have positions, because I mean it's not important to us. Eh, we gave him the 'Advocacy Director' title and then we just gave everyone else, everyone who is a, who is part of the core team is an advocacy director, and that's pretty much it, there is no real structure to it. (Interview with Garrick Bercero, FF, 2014)

As the quote indicates, FF as an organization is structured rather loosely. Or, in the words of Garrick again:

> Red is the president, he is the leader. We're registered in the SEC[31], so we have our formal rankings and all that. But as a functioning unit, it's pretty much flat. There is no one who's really above the other. If you have an idea and you want to lead it, you want to do it, we'll support you, and you can do that. So, it's largely what you wanna do, we'll do that.

Still, to be able to handle and coordinate any ideas brought up by members, and to organize the group's main activities, such as the meetups or protest rallies, there is a so-called "Coordinating Council." "We call it the Coordinating Council," another FF core member told me visibly amused, "because we like alliterations." "So it's Filipino Freethinkers, Coordinating Council, we have an Editorial Exchange, this is for the articles that (…) get posted on our website." These groups do exist, however, mainly *online*, as he further explained: "FF is mostly an online group, a lot of our members don't

[31] The SEC is the Security and Exchange Commission of the Philippines.

even meet in person, so we have a lot of groups on Facebook to help run our stuff." Basically, the Coordinating Council brings the different groups and the above-mentioned "Advocacy Directors" together:

> So, we have a few Facebook groups, we have different Facebook groups for different chapters, but the Coordinating Council is where the heads of each chapter are there, the heads of each advocacy are there, and we talk about: Hey, this issue has come up! Let's talk about this, what can we do about it? When's our next meetup? We need to get our invite posted, let's post… what do we, etc., so it's basically all the dirty work behind FF. It's basically what we would sit down in a meeting and discuss, but it's just online." (Interview with FF core member, 2014)

The Council also comprises a group of "senior advisors," which includes, for example, Dr. Sylvia Claudio of the *University of the Philippines* (UP) who focuses on women's rights, reproductive health rights and LGBT rights, or Dr. Margie Holmes, a famous psychologist and sex-therapist based in Manila. The areas in which both of these advisors are specializing, represent some of the main goals, and fields of activism of FF members, as will become clear in the section below, where I describe the group's agenda and activities.

Chapters

Aside from the main group in Manila, led by Red and the other core members, some of whom I have mentioned already, there exist several other "regional" FF chapters, and also so-called "campus" chapters affiliated at different universities. To be officially recognized and approved by the main chapter, both regional and campus chapters have to follow certain guidelines, which specifically pertain to each type, respectively, and are published on the FF website. People who are interested in setting up a regional chapter, for example, are asked to provide some personal background information, and information about the local area, explain the reasons for starting a chapter there, and to submit a 500 words essay about "freethinking." Campus chapters, on the other hand, should be comprised of enrolled students at the respective university, should have at least one faculty advisor and be formally registered within the university's administrative body. With regard to the latter requirement, however, the FF guidelines state: "We understand that this is often impossible, especially for students in Catholic

schools. Because of this, there will be some leeway regarding this rule" (FF n.d.-d).

At the time of my research, all the FF chapters were coordinated by Garrick Bercero as FF's official "Affiliations Director." In our interview I asked him about the different FF chapters and he told me that the most active ones were the FF Metro Manila South (MMS) group, the campus chapter at the University of the Philippines Los Baños branch (UPLB), and the Davao regional group, which is located on the island of Mindanao in the country's south. While I did not have the chance to visit the latter, I was able to attend several meetups of the MMS group, some of which were also attended by members of the UPLB chapter. "Less active are the Cebu ones, the Bohol ones… they're usually, they only have meetups when one of us from Manila will go there and hold something," Garrick said. Some former chapters also have merged, such as the UP Manila chapter and the group at the nearby Catholic-run De La Salle University (DLSU). Together they formed "FF Taft," named after the big street, along which DLSU is located. To my knowledge, also the UP Diliman chapter, formerly a separate group founded by Garrick himself (see chapter 6), got together with students from the nearby Ateneo De Manila University to organize as the "Katipunan" group. Katipunan Avenue is a major highway in Quezon City named after the historical revolutionary and secret society led by national hero Andrés Bonifacio. It connects both universities and nowadays is home to numerous popular coffee shops, bars, and restaurants. Later, however, the FF Katipunan group dissolved, and some of its members are nowadays simply attending the meetups of the main chapter, which during the time of my research where often held at Katipunan Avenue anyway. The corresponding Facebook sites of those groups that have become inactive for some time are "archived" by FF online administrators, but always remain open to be revived by potential new volunteers.

Financial structures

All the work is done on a volunteer basis. There is no paid position in FF. At least not yet. As one core member told me in an interview when I asked him about how he would like FF to evolve: "Of course, this is from an administrative point of view: it would be nice, if we could get enough regular funding to hire one secretary, just one full-time employee, just to hand all the administrative things — which we hate. Ehm, just all the […] managing contacts, you know, keeping calendar appointments, that sort of things,

just one secretary…" Until this member's wish might come true some day in the future, however, all the "staff" members of FF still have to use their spare time in order to keep the organization running. To my knowledge, all the costs for FF's activities are covered by the core members alone, most of whom, indeed, seem to have the financial capabilities to do so. In fact, as I will further discuss in chapter 6, FF is commonly regarded — both by FF members themselves as well as by members of the other like-minded organizations — as a group of economically "well-off," or "better-off" people. This situation enables FF to stay independent from any external funding, unlike, for example, PATAS, which is more reliant on its international networks in this regard.

Agenda & activities

Aside from their strong presence on different online channels, FF members are usually busy organizing the group's regular meetups held every other week, or are engaged in some forms of social activism. All three of these activities are important for the organization, although one or the other area might temporarily shift to the foreground, depending on the circumstances, for example, when some political or social events related to the group's main agenda are happening. In the following sections I briefly introduce some of FF's main activities.

Web & social media

Through its digital channels such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and its official website, FF members announce events, attract new members, coordinate their activities, moderate online discussions, stage public protests, reach a potential global audience, and spread their ideas. As for the secular movement in the Philippines as a whole, the importance of the internet and social media for FF thus cannot be overstated. When I asked Red about the significance of social media for FF, he told me: "Oh, it's great, we don't have as much resources as the Catholic Church does. So, social media — being a practically free medium to use — is very beneficial to us, because we have a larger reach, a larger audience that we wouldn't have gotten if it weren't for social media… so, yah."

Red himself even received the so-called "Do More Award" for being a "Digital

Trailblazer." The "Do More Awards" were launched in 2013 by the social news network *Rappler* in order "to honor achievers from all walks of life." Aside from the "The Digital Trailblazer" there were other categories such as "The Artist," "The Social Entrepreneur," or "The Innovator." Through public and panel vote the winner among three nominated candidates in each category was selected and honored at a ceremony on November 28, 2013, at the Makati "Shangri-La" hotel (Ranada 2013).

The official FF website is filled with articles, in particular opinion pieces by FF members about a large variety of topics, e.g. "The Case for Unconditional Assisted Suicide," "After The Pope Has Gone," "The Persistence of Carl Sagan's Message," "Homophobia: 60 Years After the Death of Alan Turing," or "Population and Poverty." There is also a special article-series called "Meet a freethinker," in which FF members are interviewed and asked to give their individual take on "freethinking." (see chapter 4) Some articles, directly accessible through the main site, are further subsumed under specific themes, which are central to the agenda of FF, such as the "RH Bill," "Human Rights," "Reason & Science," and, of course, "Secularism." The rubric "In The News" lists numerous articles that have been published by the general media in the Philippines and beyond, in which either FF as a group or some individual members are featured.

FF also created its own series of podcasts, in which Red and some of the core members — or often also some special guests — talk about various subjects such as "How straight allies can fight for LGBT rights," "Abortion Rights in the Philippines," "Feminism," "Three Questions That Predict Atheism," "There Really Is No God, Is There?," or "Ban Private Cars to Improve Traffic?" Since the very first podcast — a "wrap up" of the year 2010 — was posted on the FF website on December 31, 2010, several dozens of titles have been produced, at times even on a weekly basis. All the videos have been archived on the website and can be accessed freely also on the group's own YouTube channel. On the latter one can also find footage of the early FF Forums, the group's participation at the Manila Pride March, some of Red's talks and interviews etc.

Meetups

Since their very first gathering in 2009, FF has been organizing regular meetups every other week, at which they bring together around 20 to 30 people — sometimes even up

to 40 — in different locations in Metro Manila, mostly coffee shops and restaurants. There, participants are supposed to discuss "the ethics behind the latest scientific discoveries, the consequences of certain current events, suggestions for improving our society on both small and grand scales, etc." (FF n.d.-e). Besides their social activism, these regular meetups are the cornerstone of FF. Given their great importance for FF as a community for "freethinkers," I will outline the general structure of such a meetup. Rather than focusing on one particular meetup, I will do so, however, by giving a summarized version of my ethnographic observations and impressions that I collected at 19 different regular FF meetups in 2013, 2014, and 2016.

Each meetup follows more or less the same procedure. A few days before the actual meetup takes place, which is either on Saturday or Sunday, an invitation is posted on Facebook and on the official FF website, announcing its exact location and the intended discussion topics. The latter ranges from religion-, or secularism-related issues, over current social debates in- and outside the Philippines, moral dilemmas — discussed, for example, through thought-experiments —, to pop-cultural stuff. At some of the meetups I attended, the topics announced and discussed there included, for example, "Boycotting the Russian Olympics," "Building a better secular movement," "Social media: sadness and stalking," "Rebranding bigotry: St. Francis and friendly fundamentalism," "Miley Cyrus' VMA performance: art or crap," "Euthanasia," "Generation Y and our Unhappiness," "8 Million Peso Flagpoles, why bother?" and "The Pope on Homosexuality and Abortion."

"How do you come up with the discussion topics?" When I asked Red this question for the first time we just had met coincidentally at a shopping mall and got into a short conversation over coffee. He replied: "I just pull them out of my butt!" Fortunately, when I asked him again a few months later, this time during our tape-recorded interview at his house, he gave me a slightly more elaborated answer. There are three sources for new topics, he said. First, he sometimes just picks a topic out of the many things that he anyway shares on his Facebook wall, and of which he might be convinced that it would also serve well "for a fun discussion." Secondly, other people make suggestions on FF's social media site, and thirdly, interesting local or global current events. For Red, it is important to bring together topics on which people don't agree too much, because this would bear the risk of a boring discussion. "So if that happens, we either throw the topic out altogether, or we find a very controversial angle on it, so that

freethinkers can still disagree. So really, disagreement is what makes for a fun discussion!" Some of the topic posts are accompanied by links to online articles from diverse sources, e.g. newspapers or blogs, which are supposed to serve as an entry point, or as a stimulation for the actual discussion at the meetup.

The last topic at the meetup usually consists of the so-called "raunchy topic of the week," where moral questions and issues concerning sexuality and sexual behavior are discussed. These topics, which included, for example, "Sex in a progressive future," "Public masturbation: would you do it?" or "Orgies," have two major functions. First, it is a manifestation of FF's general "sex-positive" attitude, as members call it, and which they regard as an important element of a "healthy" society. As Red told me: "We (…) generally have a very sex positive view of things, you know, we believe that the better you can talk about sex, the healthier ideas you have about it, the better the sex you will have, and the healthier a society will be in general. Like, negative attitudes towards sex is another symptom of an unhealthy society." Or, in the words of Garrick, whom I asked about the idea behind the "raunchy topic" as well:

> So, well, the idea is to make sex-positive conversations a normal thing, because in the Philippines it's very taboo, you're not supposed to talk about sex at all, anything about sex is, is just, you're not supposed to do those things. So, the motivation behind the 'raunchy topic of the week,' the reason behind us doing it every meetup, is to make that a normal thing. That if you talk about sex, people not gonna be disgusted by what you say, your ideas will be considered, and people won't judge you for it — that's probably the most important thing, because it's what most people fear if you talk about sex-stuff. It's like: Oh, you're a pervert! You're disgusting, you're deviant! And we wanna provide a haven for discussions such as those, that, where talking about sex is fine. (Interview with Garrick Bercero, FF, 2014)

Secondly, the discussion of such topics is further seen as an "initiative" to "keep things light," as Kenneth Keng — aforementioned Reproductive Health Advocacy Director of FF — told me. According to him the "raunchy topic" in a way ensures that "there can be a little fun from all the heavy stuff."

The scheduled starting time of the meetups, which is usually 2:30pm, is often delayed until enough people have arrived. Even though the situation improves remarkably on Sundays, when most of the meetups are held, Manila's (in)famous traffic situation still makes the arrival time of many members to some extent unpredictable. Especially in the case of people who are coming from more distant parts of the

Metropolitan area. In fact, some participants might have to travel for up to two hours using public transportation in order to arrive at the meetup, which is one of the reasons why FF tries to shift locations. The waiting time for the people who have already arrived is often bridged by playing digital trivia or some board games.

Eventually, the official meetup starts with a short welcoming speech by Red, in which he introduces himself and mentions some "ground rules" for the discussions to follow, e.g. to minimize side conversations, to speak as much as possible in English rather than in Tagalog — due to the presence of some foreigners and non-Tagalog speakers (including, admittedly, the anthropologist) —, to refrain from "flirting" until the post-meetup etc. The latter advice usually results in outright laughter among the crowd. Then the introduction round begins, in which all participants are asked — one by one — to introduce themselves by mentioning their name, their occupation and, their "belief system." Especially first time attendees are invited by Red to give a more detailed description of the latter, of how their beliefs or their nonbelief, if at all, have changed over time. (see chapter 4) Besides a positioning in this regard, participants are sometimes also asked to share "something interesting" that has happened in their personal life since the last meetup. Not everyone follows this invitation, but many do so by talking, for example, about some events, or special activities they have participated in. Sometimes they also share more intimate stuff. The resulting atmosphere of these introductory procedures once led an attendee to introduce himself tongue-in-cheek as an "alcoholic."

Attendees are further requested to answer the so-called "question of the week" that Red poses before the actual introduction round begins. An answer usually consists of ranking oneself in a scale from 1 to 10 and a short explanation, or justification of it. The questions are often related to one of the discussion topics. For instance, as mentioned above at one of the meetups the discussion included the topic "Social media: sadness and stalking." For the related "question of the week" participants were asked to rank themselves with regard to how much they use Facebook to "stalk" other people. At another meetup the "question" was at what age one had his or her first sexual encounter and if one would consider it in hindsight as the "right" time. At the last meetup of 2013 Red asked the attendees: "What trend, term or phrase of 2013 would you like people to forget in 2014?" At some meetups, right after this introductory procedure, the floor is opened up to collect some "current events" mentioned by the

participants, mainly political ones that happened both on a national, as well as on a more global level.

Then, finally, the formal discussions of the announced topics begins. Red, sometimes supported by another FF core member, shortly introduces the first topic to be discussed. Depending on the type of the issue, this is done, for example, by summarizing the respective event, by narrating some personal experiences or anecdotes related to the theme, or — in the case that an article has been mentioned or linked to on the website — by giving a short outline of that. The phrasing of the topic sometimes allows a "pro" or "contra" position. "Show off hands!" Red requests the participants in such cases, and then people of each "camp" — plus the "undecided" ones — are given the chance to explain the reasons for their respective stance on the matter. As mentioned above, most of the time the topics are formulated "provocative" enough to stimulate an engaging debate, which at times can get quite heated. Red, however, always moderates these discussions with ease and wit, summarizing or sharpening participants' arguments (thereby making sure not to judge them in any way), by introducing new perspectives or — from time to time — by sharing his own opinion, or talking about related personal experiences. After around 30 minutes, he asks for some final comments on the topic. Especially people, who might have changed their minds in the course of the discussion, i.e. who have switched to the other "camp," are invited to speak up. Sometimes up to five or six topics are discussed in this way until Red closes the official meetup at around 5:30pm.

After a round of applause all attendees are asked to gather for a group picture, which always gets posted two weeks later together with the invitation for the next meetup on FF's digital channels. Then, the venue for dinner is discussed, usually a not too expensive restaurant somewhere nearby. Red and the other FF core members make sure that all meetup attendees, who would like to join for food and drinks, can either share a ride with those who have come by car, or that they know how to commute to the agreed-upon location using public transportation. These post-meetup gatherings are — compared to the more official, moderated and formalized discussion meetups — very informal. As I will describe in more detail in chapter 4, they play an important part in the construction of their collective identity as a secularist group, since they provide FF members a space where they can, for example, talk openly about their experiences as nonbelievers in Philippine society.

The general description of a regular FF meetup and its post-meetup gathering given so far refers only to the FF main chapter. In the second half of my fieldwork I was able to also attend five meetups of another officially recognized "regional" chapter, the FF Metro Manila South group (FF MMS). Their meetups follow almost the same structure as the main chapter's meetups, e.g. the introduction rounds, where one is invited to tell "something interesting" that has happened and where one is asked to mention his or her "belief system," the "question of the week," the moderated discussions of different topics very similar to the ones discussed at the main chapter meetups etc. However, the context or atmosphere at the MMS meetups is in a way more "familial" and quite informal: the number of participants rarely reaches 10, and most of them know each other well for a long time. At the first gathering I was told by several attendees that the MMS group, indeed, was more "community oriented." In the past, for example, they had held meetups at the beach and went swimming together after the discussions. Some of the MMS members are also regular attendees of the FF main chapter meetups. Contrary to the latter's shifting of locations, however, all the MMS chapter meetups that I have attended took place in the same restaurant inside the so-called "Festival Mall," a huge shopping mall in Alabang, which is located south of the metropolis. At one of the restaurant's tables members put up a small cardboard "FF" sign, and then food, coffee, or cake is ordered right away and consumed throughout the entire meetup. The scheduled starting time is handled even more "flexible" than at the main group's meetups. Besides adhering to FF's core rationales of "reason, science, and secularism," and the other rules of the chapter guidelines mentioned above, they are, however, quite autonomous. The post-meetup gatherings with dinner and drinks are part and parcel of the MMS meetup procedure as well, and simply take place in one of the numerous other bars and restaurants located inside the mall.

Figure 15: The president and founder of FF, Red Tani (right), moderates one of the regular FF meetups

Figure 16: Meetup of the FF Metro Manila South (FF MMS) chapter.

Socio-political activism

Over the years, FF got involved in several socio-political issues, such as LGBT rights, freedom of speech, or reproductive health (RH) rights. Especially the latter became the group's main focus in this regard. Since I explore FF members' socio-political engagement with regard to "secularism" in more detail in another part of this book, I will highlight here only very briefly a few of their activities. For instance, in support of RH policies FF members did not only join other groups in rallies and public protests, but also organized a so-called "Excommunication Party," where attendees could play games, watch video screenings and artistic performances, or sign the "Manifesto in Support of Choice," which addressed and criticized "the meddling of the CBCP[32]" — the main public organ of the Catholic Church — in governmental affairs (Aranal 2010). Famous local scholars, politicians and activists, such as Walden Bello, Dr. Sylvia Claudio from UP, or Carlos Celdran gave talks at the event.

As indicated in the introductory vignette, FF members regularly show their support of LGBT rights publicly by participating at the Manila Pride March, often dressed up in creative costumes and with self-made placards, logos, and protest signs. The group also set up a booth under the motto of "Come Out for a Kiss or a Kiss" at the LGBT Human Rights Festival in 2010, an event hosted by the *Lesbian Activism Project* (LeAP!) and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The event was attended by numerous other activist organizations such as *Amnesty International Philippines*, *AIDS Society of the Philippines*, or the *Society of Transexual Women of the Philippines*.

In 2011, a Filipino artist named Mideo Cruz provoked outrage among conservative Catholics when he mixed phallic objects with religious symbols, in particular a sculpture of Jesus Christ, in one of his works called "Poleteismo." It was staged at an exhibition titled "Kulo" at the famous *Cultural Center of the Philippines* (CCP) in Manila, but it stirred public controversy over art and blasphemy to such an extent that the Board of the CCP finally decided to close it down altogether. FF called its members to join a protest march against this decision in front of the CCP buildings. Many protesters regarded the closuring of the exhibition as a form of censorship, and thus their rally as a support for freedom of speech and expression. Mideo Cruz was further invited to join a special FF meetup, during which the entire issue was discussed at large, and an

[32] CBCP = Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

interview with the artist by above-mentioned FF core member Kenneth Keng was published on the group's website.

In the next section I will introduce the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS), which was formed two years after the foundation of FF, and represents — according to some activists — an "offshoot" organization of the latter. As will become clearer in the remaining chapters of this thesis, the two group's histories are indeed strongly intertwined, and their respective (shifting) positions vis-a-vis religion are to some significant extent shaped by their relation towards each other.

"Think without fear, live without delusion" — The *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS)

My MA thesis? I am more than surprised about their request. PATAS members are asking me to send the M.A. thesis I had written about their organization, and which I had mentioned in my first email to them only a few days ago. While I was working on this thesis to finish my studies at the University of Goettingen back then, I did not have the possibility to travel to the Philippines to do research there. Thus, the thesis is based only on an analysis of the group's online presence, where they fortunately had documented thoroughly all their activities. More importantly in this case, however, is the fact that the entire thesis is written in German*. I was just preparing for my very first trip to Manila to conduct a pre-study for my PhD project when I received their mail. I had contacted PATAS in order to inquire about whether they would accept a socio-cultural anthropologist among them who was eager to complement his online research with participant observation and individual interviews on-site over a couple of months. Now that I am reading through their reply, I realize something that I had not known before: one of the central figures within the organization was actually a German. From my office at the University of Frankfurt/Main I sent them my M.A. thesis. Only a few weeks later, I sit down together with Thomas Fleckner at the PATAS headquarter in Manila shortly before I am participating for the very first time in person at one of the group's meetups.*

From that moment onwards, Thomas and I have met regularly for conversations over coffee during the entire time of my research in the Philippines, and even after my departure we managed to stay in touch for a few more months via Skype. Due to his parents' work he was born in the UK, where he spent some time before moving with them first to the Netherlands, and then back to a small city in Germany. Later, he went on to live in a West African country, but — due to the increasing social and political discrimination of homosexuals there — eventually decided to migrate to the Philippines. Having suffered heavily from discrimination for being gay, Thomas has become an LGBT rights activist by heart, and as such he was interviewed in Germany for a magazine called MOIN. He is also a very outspoken self-declared atheist, and had joined a local chapter of the *German Humanist Association* (HVD) during his time in Germany. Thus, when he arrived in Manila he looked for like-minded groups in the Philippines, and found FF, whose meetups he started to attend. Then, while participating at the Manila Pride March in 2011, he incidentally met some members of PATAS, who were taking part in the rally as well. Since their group was more explicitly focused on atheism than FF, Thomas got interested. At first, he just attended a meetup, but was hesitant to get engaged any further. However, after the foundation of BATAS, the LGBT wing of PATAS, which I will introduce below, he became more involved. He was eventually asked by Marissa Langseth, the organization's co-founder, if he wanted to become even more active in the group. Hence, Thomas started as the official "Public Relations Officer" (PRO) for PATAS, but later he would hold several other positions within the group, including the vice-presidency.

He was very enthusiastically about my PhD project, and thus constantly supported me by keeping me up-to-date on internal developments of PATAS, by agreeing to be interviewed and by sharing his own thoughts about the situation of nonbelievers in the country, as well as by giving me some documents about the organization. He certainly had been one of the driving forces behind PATAS until he got — for different personal reasons — somewhat disillusioned and consequently withdrew himself from the organization in 2015 in order to focus more on his activism for LGBT rights — not least by founding his own group together with some of his activist friends. The case of Thomas Fleckner reflects very well what will become even more apparent in the following sections, and further in chapter 5: from the beginning PATAS has been strongly embedded in transnational networks of secular groups and discourses.

Foundation

PATAS was founded on February 14, 2011, through a joint effort by John Paraiso and Marissa T. Langseth. The latter, who is also known as "Ms. M" among local activists, is a Cebu-born Filipina who migrated to the US, where she resided also during the establishment of PATAS. I met her only once at the PATAS Humanism Conference in Cebu City, and was able to talk to her only briefly. In an online article titled "The woman who lit the fire" on the group's official website, she is introduced as follows: "Ms. M is an atheist and philanthropist who enjoys her married life in the United States of America. She works in one of the biggest companies in the same country as a consultant and a medical practitioner, happily married to a protestant since March 31, 1996" (PATAS 2013). While she provided all the financial support, and got engaged in a lot of networking activities in the United States, it was mainly John Paraiso, whom I have introduced in the previous chapter, and some of his friends, who did the ground work in Manila. They took care, for example, of the registration of PATAS as an official organization. In fact, as John proudly told me, PATAS was the very first organization with "atheism" in its name to be registered[33] at the Philippine *Security and Exchange Commission* (SEC).

The acronym PATAS was intentionally chosen since the word *patas* in Tagalog means "equal," or "equality." Thus, the name was supposed to embody what the group was fighting for: recognition, and "equal" rights for nonbelievers in Philippine society. The first logo of PATAS, designed by John Paraiso himself, depicts the letter "A" for atheism — taken, however, from the pre-colonial indigenous alphabet called *baybayin*. The "A" is further covered by an Asian rice hat, which, as I was told, should symbolize that atheism or unbelief was something for "every Filipino." In the background of the "A" one can see the globe, around which the group's name is written. In a way, the logo represented quite vividly one of the initial main goals of the newly founded organization: to gather Filipino atheists, to promote atheism in Philippine society, and — in the words of John — to "put the Philippines on the atheist map." Later, however, it was "modernized," i.e. redesigned into a more minimalized form.

[33] UPaC was registered only as a student organization inside a university, i.e. the University of the Philippines.

Figure 17: Different versions of the PATAS logo (on top the first one down to the most recent one).

As I will describe below, the first activities of PATAS mainly took place at Rizal Park, or Luneta, a public park introduced in the previous chapter. Eventually however, one of the former members offered his house to become the group's first headquarters, where the "officers" could then meet and organize their future plans more privately. Many of these early PATAS core members, however, left the group after some time — including John Paraiso as the co-founder and president himself —, and a new headquarters was established in Quezon City, which is located in the northern part of the capital. There, the group was able to rent the rooftop of a large building owned by a PATAS member. Subsequently all the meetups would be held there, and even a small library was built up.

Organizational structures

During the ten months of my fieldwork in Manila PATAS has undergone several organizational restructuring processes. Some of the larger changes in this regard included, for example, the assignment of Tess Termulo as the new and first female president of PATAS; the resigning of co-founder and chairwoman Marissa Langseth, who went on to build up another group, *Humanist Alliance Philippines, International* (HAPI; see previous chapter); the engagement of the Malaysian businessman and former PATAS vice-president Yek Lai Fatt as the organization's new chairman and his focus on humanitarian activities (see chapter 5); the formation of a PATAS youth wing, which, however, got cancelled shortly afterwards due to some internal problems; the break-away of the PATAS Cebu chapter; and the establishment of a new "Board of Trustees" to guarantee transparency, the publication of some elaborated official "Organizational Bylaws," as well as a monthly regular meetup, all of which were part of some broader efforts to professionalize the organization.

This brief overview might indicate already that PATAS' general organizational structure seems, on the one hand, way more complex and hierarchical — at least on paper — when compared to FF. On the other hand, PATAS must be considered also as somewhat less "stable." From early on there have been numerous PATAS "offices" to be held by its more active members, including a president, vice-president, CEO, PRO, corporate secretary, international secretary, finance director, internal auditor, web content manager, library custodian, membership director, event planner etc. For a rather small organization like PATAS this internal structure is quite remarkable.

Apparently, however, this brought some difficulties, not least due to the at times high fluctuation of members, as well as the ever-changing resources and personal involvement of the group's core members. Nevertheless, as will become clear in the following sections, PATAS was still able to achieve many of its above-mentioned goals.

Chapters

In the beginning there were basically two "main" chapters of PATAS, the one located in Manila, the other in Cebu — the home of co-founder Marissa Langseth. As I was told by a former PATAS Manila activist in an interview, due to the latter fact, the group was somehow afraid — or had the "feeling," as he put it — that the Cebu chapter would eventually become the actual main office of PATAS and thus the Manila chapter only "secondary." And according to him, this is exactly what eventually had happened. While at times there might have been, indeed, some rivalries or quarrels between the two groups, they, of course, also cooperated very successfully on several levels, in particular during the organization of the larger conventions, of which the first was held in Manila, and the second one in Cebu. During my own attendance of the latter in June 2013, I had been able to talk to some of the core members of the Cebu chapter, and was allowed to visit their office a few days prior to the event (see figure 18). However, shortly after my arrival in Manila in August for the longer fieldwork, the group in Cebu got dissolved, and since I did not want to get involved in any difficult internal organizational dynamics, I refrained from visiting them again. Thus, the data I collected is almost exclusively based on my participant observation, interviews and conversations with members of the Manila group, which has remained as PATAS' only main chapter. By looking at the early online articles on the PATAS website, however, one can see that the Cebu chapter had been very active in organizing meetups, relief operations, and social events, some of which I will describe below.

There had existed several other regional PATAS chapters, e.g. in Davao, Bohol, Baguio, and in the Bicol region, for all of which a few activities are documented online. Aside from the group located in Bicol, whose official "Chapter Director" Homar Murillo was involved in numerous forms of activism, all these chapters, however, seemed to have been way less active than the main groups in Manila and Cebu.

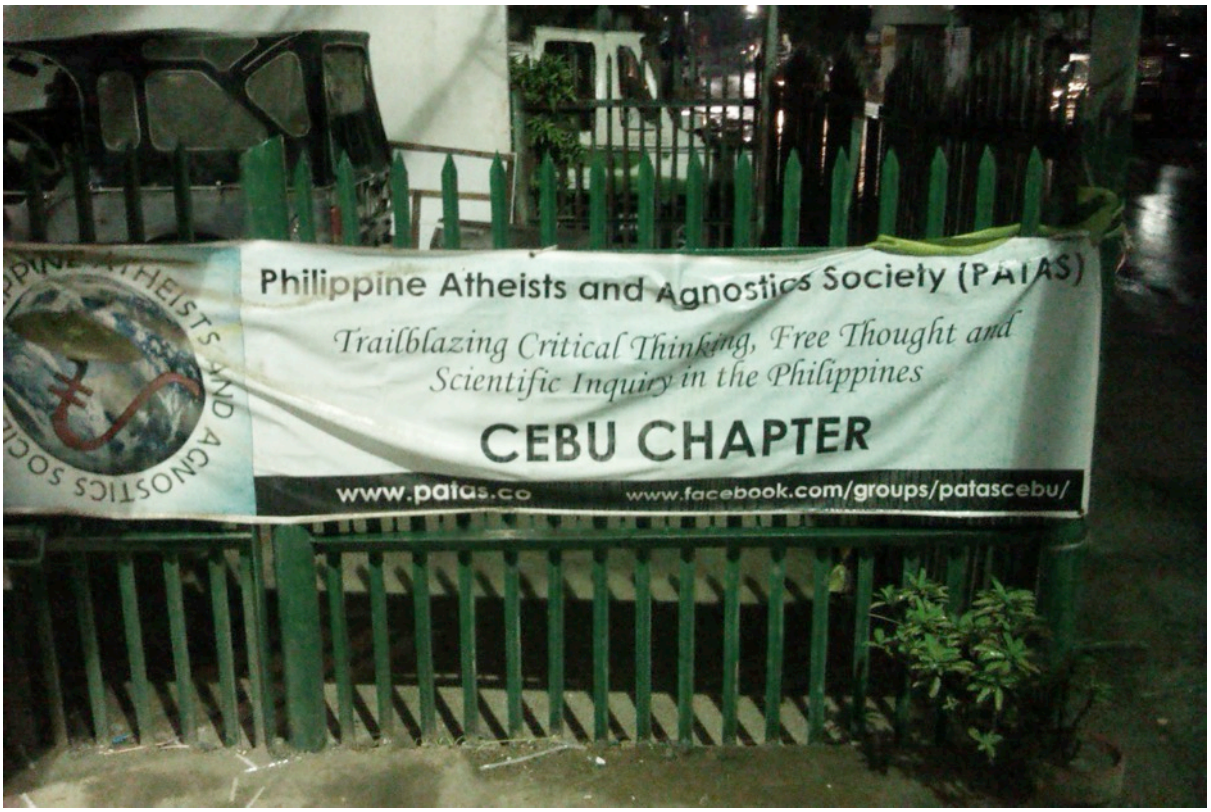

Figure 18: Headquarter of the PATAS Cebu chapter in Cebu City.

BATAS

"LGBT and Atheist. These are two ideas that seem very much taboo in the Philippine culture." This quote is taken from an article on the PATAS website, which introduced a new subgroup of PATAS, specifically focused on LGBT-related issues: the *Bahaghari Atheists and Agnostics Society* (BATAS). The Tagalog term *bahagari*, referring to a "rainbow" symbolizes that "[a]s LGBT, BATAS represents the various colors that sexuality can manifest." And, "[a]s atheists and agnostics, the group represents those who chose to do good and be good despite knowing there is no reward or punishment in the afterlife. As both, BATAS stands for the progress of humanity, away from barbaric customs and beliefs that have caused countless deaths and needless sufferings" (PATAS 2012). In fact, LBGT rights have been one of the most important socio-political issues for PATAS ever since. Aside from the group's regular participation at the Pride March in Manila, this newly formed LGBT wing BATAS organized numerous activities such as the "BATAS Grand Meet-Up" with talks and artistic performances (see below).

Financial structure

As in the case of FF, the core members of PATAS — the PATAS officers — do not get paid, everything within the organization is done voluntarily. However, in contrast to FF, there is an official membership fee in PATAS, although I am not sure of how many "members" ever have actually paid it. As mentioned above, in the beginning it was co-founder and former chairwoman Marissa Langseth, who covered all the group's expenses on her own. The larger events that PATAS has organized later on, such as the Atheist Convention in Manila in 2012 or the Humanist Conference in Cebu in 2013, were financially supported by like-minded organizations from abroad, with which PATAS had established some cooperative relationships. The so-called "Free Medical Clinic" that the group has set up in 2014 and which I will describe in chapter 5 was funded mainly by Yek Lai Fatt, who became the new chairman of PATAS after Marissa Langseth had decided to leave the group at the end of 2013.

International networks

Unlike FF, and as mentioned at the outset, PATAS has, in fact, been firmly embedded in transnational networks from early on. Co-founder Marissa Langseth, who lives in the United States successfully established links to organizations such as the *American Humanist Association* (AHA) and the *Atheist Alliance International* (AAI). PATAS is also an official member of the global umbrella organization *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU), and has maintained a strong relationship with the latter's youth wing, the *International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization* (IHEYO). During the time of my fieldwork in Manila, Thomas Fleckner, whom I introduced before, further tried to establish a cooperation with the *German Humanist Association* (HVD). As an official representative of PATAS, he also attended the *World Humanist Congress* hosted by the *British Humanist Association* (BHA) in Oxford, UK, in 2014. In chapter 5 I will discuss in more detail, how the international connections of PATAS on an institutional level become manifest also on an ideological level, i.e. in the general discourse and practices of the group's members.

Agenda & activities

In this section I will describe some of the activities of the PATAS main chapter in Manila, its LGBT wing BATAS, as well as some of the events organized by the Cebu chapter. All these activities are usually well documented on the PATAS website and its Facebook group. By giving a brief overview on the various practices and social activism of its members, the different elements of the group's agenda as an atheist organization within Philippine society and as part of a larger transnational secular movement become apparent.

Early activities

One of the first larger events organized by PATAS was an atheist "coming out" campaign at the Rizal Park in Manila. For two days straight John Paraiso and some of the early activists set up a booth, at which books about atheism and unbelief were provided for interested visitors to flip through. Some documentaries about religion and evolutionary theory were screened on a small TV station that PATAS members had installed as well. Similarly, the PATAS Cebu chapter organized a so-called "Beach Outing" in June 2012. Unlike the "coming out" campaign in Rizal Park, this event, however, was less directed at a potential public audience, but focused more on the bonding between the group's members. Still, the message behind this activity, during which participants shared meals and played beach volleyball together, seemed to be the same. As one member stated in a short report about the Cebu event, which was posted on the PATAS website: "As you can see, Atheists are normal people so do not be afraid to come out to the open. Come out and join us as exciting things never fail to happen with the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society" (Waking Nomad 2012b). Further activities of the PATAS Cebu chapter in the same vein comprised, for example, a "Road to Reason" walking tour meant as a celebration of the "National Atheist Day."

Under the slogan of "Know Your Religion," or "KYR," PATAS members of the main chapter in the capital organized several activities through which they strived "to learn first-hand the aspects of different faiths in the Philippines" (Cruz 2011). These included, for example, a visit of a Buddhist temple in Manila in June 2011, where the PATAS activists watched documentaries about Buddhism, were allowed to participate in the

chanting service, and even got invited to join a silent dinner with vegetarian meals. A few months later, in September 2011, a PATAS member (Reyes 2011) posted a personal account on the PATAS website about the group's visit of the Victory Church, which is located at a huge shopping mall complex called "Robinson's Galleria."

Conventions

With the (financial) support of several like-minded organizations outside the Philippines, with which PATAS has been affiliated, PATAS members were able to organize three larger international conventions in 2012, 2013, and 2015, respectively. The "First Atheist Convention in Southeast Asia" under the slogan "Godless Philippines: Are you ready for this?" held in Manila in April 2012 was attended by almost 200 people, including international guests from *Atheist Alliance International* (AAI) and the *Freedom From Religion Foundation* (FFRF), some of whom also gave talks during the official program. In June 2013, PATAS hosted another conference with an international outlook, this time, however, on the island of Cebu. The "Asia Humanism Conference — Beyond Barriers," which I was able to attend myself, was thus organized mainly by members of the PATAS Cebu chapter, with major support from the *International Humanist Ethical Youth Organization* (IHEYO). In chapter 5 I will describe both conventions in more detail. The third one titled "PATASCON2015" was held again in Manila on May 31, 2015, i.e. a year after I finished my fieldwork there. In her article "Reflections and anecdotes about PATASCON2015," Tess Termulo, who as the president of PATAS gave the opening remarks at the convention, mentioned — aside from a Philippine-based company called *YLF Contracts and Costs Solutions* — a whole range of international atheist and humanist groups as sponsors for the event: the umbrella organization *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU), the *Atheist Alliance International* (AAI), the *British Humanist Association* (BHA), the *Atheist Foundation of Australia*, the Human-Etisk Forbund or the *Norwegian Humanist Association*, and the *Icelandic Humanist Association*. The theme of the convention "Breaking Through With Reason and Humanism" further indicates what I will describe later as PATAS' "humanist turn."

Web & social media

As in the case of FF, the internet and especially social media like Facebook and YouTube are important digital channels for PATAS to disseminate their ideas through articles, podcasts and videos, to announce the monthly meetups and other events, to organize and coordinate the work of the PATAS officers, and to engage in discussions in their online forums with believers and nonbelievers alike. The official PATAS website underwent several graphical and structural changes throughout the years of the group's existence. At its core, however, have always been numerous articles written by PATAS members and supporters about a variety of subjects broadly related to the organization's agenda and its core themes such as the separation of church and state, LGBT rights, RH Bill/Law, personal opinions and experiences, official statements, or reports documenting the activities of PATAS. A special rubric called "Nonbelief Journeys" featured several intimate accounts from atheists and agnostics of their different paths to unbelief in Philippine society. Further, under the slogan of "Juan Pilosopo" PATAS launched its own podcast series. On the group's YouTube channel one can find, for example, talks from the different PATAS conventions, and an interview with Poch Suzara, the "grandfather of atheism in the Philippines" introduced in the previous chapter.

Monthly meetups

Compared to the meetups of FF described above, the meetups of PATAS were less structured and less formalized, but thus in a way also more varied. In the following I will describe their meetups, again in a generalized form, in order to highlight some of the differences and similarities with FF. First of all, it has to be noted that PATAS members did not meet up as often and as regular as FF members did during the time of my fieldwork. They were engaged, however, in several "irregular" activities, like the "BATAS Grand Meet-Up" in September 2013 or a relief operation in the wake of the typhoon "Yolanda." In 2014 they also conducted a so-called "Free Medical Clinic," under the motto of "Good without God." Besides these additional events and activities, some of which I will describe in more detail in other sections and chapters, PATAS members tried to organize a regular meetup at least once a month. I attended seven of these monthly meetups in 2013, 2014, and 2016, most of which were held at the PATAS headquarters (PATAS HQ).

Figure 19: An official PATAS meetup has turned into a more informal post-meetup gathering.

"PATAS?" he asked me, without adding any further words to his inquiry. Several times when I arrived at the "Imacron Building" in Kamuning Road located in Quezon City, in the northern part of Metro Manila, to attend a PATAS meetup I was stopped at the entrance door by a bodybuilder-shaped man with black hair and dark sunglasses. After nodding my head, I had to write my name into a small register book, and was given a white plastic chair, which I was supposed to carry up the stairways to the top floor. There, I stepped out on the balcony, back into the hot and humid tropical air, where usually a couple of PATAS members already waited for the official meetup to begin. The first meetup that I was able to attend during my pre-study in April 2013 was scheduled for 4pm, but eventually started at around 5.30pm with only a dozen of participants — all male. While the gender ratio had changed only slightly at my second meetup in August the same year, the number of attendees increased significantly. Almost 30 persons listened to the lecture of medical practitioner Tess Termulo, who later became the first female president of PATAS, on the topic of abortion. Before she delved into her

Power Point presentation, she noticed and amusedly commented on the obvious gender imbalance of the attendees.

Her talk was followed with an introduction round quite similar to the ones at the FF meetups. At PATAS, however, it were usually the "officers" who started to introduce themselves first and explained their position and tasks within the organization, before the other participants were asked to state their names as well, and to talk about their own (non-)belief journeys. All of the attendees, with only a few exceptions, positioned themselves, indeed, as "atheists," "agnostics," or "agnostic atheists" etc. While these introductory procedures were a constitutive element of every PATAS meetup, the remaining time was filled with different activities. At the meetup I just described, for example, a mock debate was organized. Apt to the topic of the presentation by Tess, the first topic of the discussion was "Legalization of Abortion?," for which pro and contra groups were formed and then each was given some time for preparation. At other meetups there were lectures on "Argumentation 101," "Debate 101," "Positions of Belief & Knowledge," on aggression from an evolutionary theoretical perspective, or on sexual orientations and common misconceptions about LGBTs. Most of these talks were delivered by members of PATAS, sometimes, however, there were also external guests. For instance, a longterm FF member was invited to give a presentation on "D.I.Y. Ethics," in which he spoke about the "Do It Yourself" culture as a form of "empowerment." After mentioning the slogan of "Don't hate the media, become the media!" he distributed self-published magazines as examples of how one can spread his or her ideas without being dependent on mainstream media channels. Aside from such lectures, there were also a film-screening, spontaneous discussions on specific topics such as "conspiracy theories," or general announcements about upcoming PATAS events and activities. Since the balcony, where almost all the meetups took place, was only partly covered, the heat, sudden heavy rains, or the noise coming up from the big congested street along which the building of the PATAS HQ was located, made it at times quite difficult for attendees to actually focus on the talks and discussions — including myself. The general atmosphere at the meetups was thus rather relaxed and side-talkings or -activities were not uncommon.

These formal meetups sometimes led directly into the more informal post-meetup gatherings, which often were held simply at the PATAS HQ as well, often until late at night. When there were any minors at the meetups, which, in fact, was the case several

times, PATAS officers, who usually organized some drinks, took great care that they did get their hands only on the non-alcoholic ones. For some of us the post-meetups frequently ended in a small eatery across the street of the "Imacron Building," which served cheap, rice-based meals such as *Tapsilog*, a popular Filipino dish normally consumed for breakfast. On some occasions, however, the post-meetups were organized at different larger restaurants, more or less close to the PATAS HQ. After one meetup, for example, PATAS members spontaneously captured an entire jeepney, which incidentally was empty, and made a special deal with the driver to bring us all to the Tomas Morato Avenue, an entertainment district popular for its various bars and restaurants. As in the case of the FF post-meetup gatherings over food and drinks, also PATAS members seemed to enjoy those evenings very much, not least because they allowed them to talk freely with "like-minded" people about their personal thoughts and experiences as nonbelievers. One member, for example, shared his problems of having a girlfriend with a religious, almost fundamentalist-like background, others spoke about their experiences at Catholic schools, or about not wanting to disappoint their religious parents by telling them about their own atheism etc.

Activities in support of LGBT rights

Like FF, also the members of PATAS have regularly attended the Pride March in Manila. In addition to that, the group, and in particular the core members of its LGBT sub-group BATAS, organized several other LGBT-related activities. Shortly after my arrival in Manila, for example, a "BATAS Grand Meet-Up" was hosted in a bar in Quezon City. This event featured several talks by guests and members of FF, the Tiger Freethinkers from UST, and PATAS itself. The presenters — some but not all of whom considered themselves as LGBT — often drew from their own experiences. Patric, a very young activist, for example, spoke of a "culture of hate and discrimination" prevalent in Philippine society. As an atheist he had experienced hate and discrimination, similar to what gays would experience here. Hence, atheists and gays were "forced to be closeted." Although he was not gay himself, he got involved in LGBT advocacy work because many of his gay friends suffered from discrimination — both in school and on the streets, as he told us. "Thankfully," he said, he was not confronted with "great hate feelings" when he asked his fellow students at the university, where he was currently enrolled, about

their personal opinions of gays. When it comes to "gay marriage," however, many of them would still show reluctance. In his view, there were a lot of misconceptions about homosexuality among the general public: people would think, for example, that it was a kind of "illness" or that it was somewhat "unnatural." Patric called for action against such "misunderstandings, misconceptions, un-acceptance" regarding gays. Thomas Fleckner, who had given a talk about "Why Atheism and Humanism Belongs Together" at the PATAS Humanism Conference in Cebu a few months earlier, was among the presenters at the BATAS event as well. This time he spoke about "Why Atheism and LGBT Belongs Together." Similar to Patric he mentioned that there were a lot of misconceptions and prejudices against atheists and gays, particularly in Philippine society. While the former would often be associated with "satanism," the latter would be regarded as "sinners." Later, Rath, at that time still the president of PATAS, deconstructed such public misconceptions about homosexuality in his presentation, and gave several reasons for fighting homophobia and for supporting LGBT rights. He also mentioned and explained one of the slogans that PATAS members — who did not consider themselves as LGBTs, but strongly supported their LGBT friends — had come up with: "Straight without the hate."

Between the talks there were musical performances, as well as a poetry reading by a young woman, whose own personal experiences with discrimination as a lesbian clearly shined through her lyrical lines. A group of elderly gays called the "The Golden Gays," all dressed in colorful, festive evening dresses, attended the event as special guests. At the end of the official program, PATAS officers Thomas Fleckner and Juan handed out "Certificates of Appreciation" to several LGBT rights activists and thanked them for their advocacy work. Sunny Garcia, for example, an artist, self-declared atheist and longterm PATAS and BATAS member, was asked to enter the stage, where he received one of these certificates. In a short speech, he reminded the audience that as a minority in this religious country "we atheists and LGBTs must learn to love ourselves." One of the "Golden Gays" was awarded for his support of elderly LGBTs. Finally, all the speakers got their certificates from Juan, including Thomas Fleckner himself, who had been one of the main organizers of the event. Before we called it a day, some of the participants and I enjoyed a few more beers, listened to the live music and engaged in talking to each other in a very relaxed atmosphere until late at night.

Figure 20: Members of PATAS moderate an event in September 2013 organized by its LGBT wing BATAS.

Figure 21: The flyer for the PATAS-BATAS Meetup organized by PATAS' LGBT wing.

Socio-political activism

> Our government is married to the church. That is why we remain a poor country. The church does not want contraceptives so we are over-populated. (Antonio ~ [pseud.] 2012)

This quote is taken from an article published on the PATAS website, in which the author called "Antonio ~" obviously refers to the issue of reproductive health (RH) policies mentioned in the introduction. According to his view, the influence of the church on the government in relation to the RH Bill/RH Law is one of the reasons for the current situation of the country which most PATAS members perceive as unacceptable. As an atheist and secular organization PATAS strongly subscribes to political "secularism," understood as the separation of religion and the state, and the case of RH policies is one of the most important issues in this regard. Only a few months after its very foundation, PATAS posted, for example, an official statement on its website, proclaiming the group's "unequivocal support" for the RH Bill (Zamora 2011). Several individual members' opinion articles followed, explicitly discussing or mentioning the issue of RH. At the aforementioned *Asia Humanism Conference*, which PATAS organized and held in Cebu City in June 2013, one of the official talks was specifically about the topic of RH. A lecture by Tess Termulo on the issue of "abortion" — one of the most controversial issues related to RH — followed at one the first meetups of PATAS that I was able to attend during my stay in Manila. At the last regular meetup of the year, in her review of the group's activities in 2013, and her outlook towards PATAS' future plans for 2014, Tess further emphasized the need to keep on talking about RH and the RH Law, which at that time was still put on halt. In April 2014, only two weeks after the Supreme Court's final decision on the constitutionality of the RH Law in Baguio City, PATAS included a talk on reproductive health in its 3rd Free Medical Clinic. In the same month, the group also dedicated a full episode of its podcast series "Juan Pilosopo" to the issue of RH.

Aside from its support of LGBT rights described above, PATAS members' engagement in the RH debate illustrates very well the socio-political dimension of organized secularism. However, it has to be noted that PATAS as a group has never been as politically involved as FF. In fact, as I will argue in chapter 4, for FF its socio-political activism has become a central cornerstone.

Humanitarian activities

Since the feeding program that PATAS members had organized on the very same day of its foundation, PATAS has been engaged in numerous further humanitarian activities including relief operations for victims of natural calamities and various forms of social work in local communities. The latter comprised, for example, another feeding program for children in Cebu, a joint blood-donation, or spending an afternoon at the *Payatas Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) for Personal Disabilities*. All these efforts are usually documented through short articles and pictures, which are published on the official PATAS website. In one of those articles, which describes a relief operation organized by PATAS members in two different barrios, so-called *barangays*, in the wake of storms and floods in August 2012, the author tells the reader why the group as such got involved in such activism in the first place:

> There are two things we know why we are inspired to do these things in our country. First, even within the walls of religious communities there are closet atheists and agnostics who are affected by this disaster. Perhaps they would want to see that such group like PATAS exists in the nation to tell them they are not alone. Second, we show our country that we can be good without God or affiliation with religious organizations and we think this is an obligation as part of the human race. (Cruz 2012)

The slogan of "Good without God" is quite prevalent in the discourse of secularists and atheist organizations worldwide. As sociologist Stephen LeDrew has argued in his study of the secular movement in North America, with humanitarian activities under this motto atheist organizations provide "moral validation for nonbelievers who seek it primarily by constructing a collective identity that emphasizes generosity and altruism" (2016, 131). Considering the common stereotypes with which atheists seem to be confronted with in the Philippines or elsewhere (e.g. in the US), especially their depiction as "immoral" people or "satanists," the perceived need to proof one's own moral integrity and capability of acting "good" as a nonbeliever is comprehensible. In fact, as I will show in chapter 5, in the year of 2014 PATAS has put almost all of its efforts in doing "good without God" through the organization of the monthly "Free Medical Clinic" in poor communities outside Metro Manila.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter showed in more detail what I have mentioned only very briefly in the introduction: FF and PATAS have a lot of things in common. As secularist groups based in Metro Manila, they cater to the same potential membership — i.e. mainly self-declared nonbelievers —, they organize similar events, such as their regular meetups, or engage in similar further activities, such as participating in protest rallies, e.g. the LGBT Pride March, and they officially support the same issues, such as human rights, reproductive health rights, LGBT rights, and, of course, political "secularism" as the separation of church and state. Moreover, there are some members who do participate actively in both groups, and on some occasions FF and PATAS cooperated also on a more formal level — at the aforementioned larger conferences organized by PATAS, for example, Red Tani as the president of FF appeared as an official speaker.

However, as indicated in my ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this thesis as well, both groups also differ in important ways, in particular with regard to their positioning towards religion and the local religious context. It is these specific positions, as well as some other differences beyond their collective religion-relatedness, that I will discuss in the following chapters.

Chapter 4

"You Are Not Alone"

FF between Atheism and Secularism

> "If one of FF's goals was the active promotion of atheism, then I most probably wouldn't be part of it, because I'm not an atheist." (Kenneth Keng, Reproductive Health Advocacy Director of FF, in Santiago 2012)

In the second half of the introduction round at a regular FF meetup, two guys — both apparently first-time attendees — introduced themselves as "Muslim" and "Catholic," respectively. They added, with a mixture of amusement and insecurity that they somehow felt "out of place." Red and some other FF members were quick to try and convince them that there was no reason for such a feeling since "religious" people were, indeed, very welcome at the meetups. In consideration of the group's particular composition, however, their reaction is understandable. During all FF's regular meetups that I was able to attend during my stay in Manila, most people introduced themselves with terms like "atheist," "agnostic," "agnostic atheist," "secular humanist" etc. The first half of the introduction round at the meetup mentioned above was no exception in this regard — hence, the two "religious" attendees' impression of being "out of place."

"Yeah, it can seem a little off-putting, just because the majority of the membership is nonreligious," Kenneth Keng told me, when we talked about this incidence. Despite being an Episcopalian, and thus one of the few religious members himself, Kenneth identifies strongly with the group and its aims — precisely because the explicit or "active" promotion of atheism is not part of its agenda, as he made clear in the interview with the local news station GMA, from which the introductory quote is taken. "It used to be that I was the only religious person in the group," he continued our conversation, "but now we have a number of them, and they do come, and we have another couple in the core group for consultation and stuff — so yeah, it's slowly starting… But I will admit that it could be somewhat off-putting" (Interview with Kenneth Keng, FF, 2014).

These short glimpses into some of the dynamics of FF's relation with religion and religious people indicate that there is not only a certain heterogeneity of individual opinions and views among members, but that there are also various levels and contexts, where such positions become manifest. In the following sections, I will explore this multi-dimensionality of FF's collective religion-relatedness by discussing what Dominik Müller in his study on the youth wing of the *Islamic Party of Malaysia* (PAS) has described as "the dynamic relationship between the two different levels of official public talk and internal discursive contestations on the micro-level." (2014, 113) Approaching the latter through ethnographic fieldwork, e.g. by attending the regular so-called *usrah* meetings of PAS during which religious education is combined with discussions about the party's political and public strategies, Müller realized the "significance of such informal processes of deliberative will-formation behind closed doors, which take place in *usrahs* and elsewhere, where the strict norms of public behavior do not apply" (2014, 113; italics in the original). His "access to PAS' internal discursive realities on the ground" thus proved to be crucial for a more adequate understanding of "community creation and interactive deliberation of normative orders" (113) among the party's members.

Similarly, what I was able to observe at the regular FF meetups that I have attended during my fieldwork in Manila, indeed, allows for a more complex picture of the group's positioning vis-à-vis religion. As indicated by the ethnographic example above and as I will describe in more detail in this chapter, these meetups — comparably to PAS' *usrah* meetings — provide the participants an important venue for articulating their identities, which for the majority of FF members consist not only in being "freethinkers" and "secularists," but in particular of their self-declared "atheism" or unbelief. By enabling attendees, for example, to share their biographies and experiences as nonbelievers in a country they perceive as overwhelmingly religious, or also through making fun about religious themes and issues, both the formal meetups as well as the more informal get-togethers afterwards create, confirm and reproduce a certain "like-mindedness" in this regard. The group's atheist character, which comes to the fore in those "internal discursive realities on the ground" (Müller 2014, 113), is, however, not entirely surprising when one considers that FF has evolved out of online "atheist" mailing lists (see chapter 3). Thus, as I will further show in this chapter, in one of their first campaigns, for instance, with which the organization aimed to attract new potential

followers, and also in several other activities and events as well, FF members positioned themselves explicitly as atheists or (re)presented the group as one appealing and catering specifically to nonbelievers within Philippine society. This nurturing of an atheist identity in more public contexts, or — to use Müller's words — in "official public talk," on the other hand, certainly has contributed to the fact that FF seems to be widely perceived as such.

At the same time, however, the group seems to be constantly struggling with exactly this atheist image, since FF from the beginning has also attempted to be more inclusive with regard to its membership. As the official website declares, FF is a "group of non-believers and progressive believers in the Philippines," although the latter label specifically refers only to a certain group of believers, i.e. those with rather liberal or progressive views on particular issues. That FF, in fact, has been able to attract such "progressive believers" is illustrated, for example, by Kenneth's long-term membership. He has been FF's official Reproductive Health (RH) Advocacy Director for a long time now — an internal office it is indeed hard to imagine a more "conservative believer" would be willing to hold.

The ambivalence in FF's relationship with religion and religious supporters, which is indicated in the observations presented so far, manifests also in the group's very name. To many members, there is an inevitable link between "freethought" and "atheism:" the latter is simply considered as the only logical and possible position to be reached when "applying" the former properly, i.e. as a particular way of thinking guided by "reason," "science," and "secularism." To others, "freethinking" in this sense does *not* automatically lead to unbelief, as can be seen, for example, in the case of Kenneth. While Red as the founder of FF had chosen "freethinkers" instead of "atheists" as the official name for the group precisely to be able to incorporate "theists" like Kenneth, or other religious people like the aforementioned two meetup attendees, this inclusiveness nevertheless creates some internal tensions, frequent discussions and negotiations among its members.

Analogous to Müller's observations on the above-mentioned *usrah* meetings of the political party PAS in Malaysia, which not only function as "a ritualized practice which is particularly vital for the creation of community and like-mindedness" (Müller 2014, 110), but "can furthermore act as test sites for innovative and potentially transgressive ideas, or starting points for significant changes in the party's political behavior" (112), I

will show how FF's "atheist" identity is thus not only (re)produced at the group's regular meetups, but also continuously contested and debated. Hence, FF's generalized positioning towards religion, which lies at the core of their identity as a secularist group, has to be seen as potentially shifting.

In fact, as I will show, such a shift in their identity (strategy) can be identified and described for FF when looking at the group from a more long-term perspective. At the beginning, FF did not engage in any social activism as an organization, since it was more focused on establishing the discussion meetups on a regular basis and on attracting new members. Later, however, the involvement in socio-political issues became more and more important. This is probably best illustrated by FF's engagement in the debate on reproductive health (RH) rights, which I will explore in more detail in the last main section of this chapter. This involvement is based mainly on the group's support for "secularism" as a strong(er) separation of religion and politics, and it included, for example, also cooperation with religious groups. While the political ideology of secularism has always been part of FF's official agenda, it seems to have gained more significance. The shift from "atheism" towards "secularism," as visible in FF's discourse and activities, might represent one effective way of handling the aforementioned tensions and debates on the appropriate stance of a freethinking group on religion. Based on the conceptual considerations outlined in the introduction, I argue that it also reflects a broader change in their (identity) strategy in achieving their overall goal of "normalizing" nonreligion. Thus, I will describe this shift of FF in LeDrew's (2016) terms as one from a "cultural" movement focused on minority discourse towards a "political" movement, and as such as a "normative change" in the sense of Müller (2015), influenced by certain "internal" as well as "external" factors. The former comprise the whole web of relations, in which FF — and its stance on religion — is situated. The actors to which FF is related to as a secularist group includes not only religious opponents like the Catholic Church, but also supportive churches like the Episcopalian Church of Kenneth as well as local like-minded groups such as PATAS. Further, the group's religion-relatedness is strongly connected to the wider public issues in which its members are involved, in particular the RH debate. Aside from these "external" factors that might have contributed to the "normative change" of FF — i.e. its aforementioned shift from a group centered on its members' atheist identities to one focused more on political secularism as its core ideology —, there are, as I will show, some more

"internal" ones as well, i.e. organizational developments.

"Meet a freethinker": negotiating secularist identities

In her famous history of the "freethinking" movement in the United States, scholar and activist Susan Jacoby stated that while "[o]ften defined as a total absence of faith in God, freethought can better be understood as a phenomenon running the gamut from the truly antireligious — those who regarded all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence from every aspect of society — to those who adhered to a private, unconventional faith revering some form of God or Providence but at odds with orthodox religious authority" (2004, 4). What she calls the "inclusiveness" of freethinking groups with regard to their membership is also what made Red Tani choose the name "freethinkers" when he founded FF back in 2009. In our interview he explained to me that "there were agnostics, there were deists, pantheists, some religious people there, so we couldn't use the word 'atheist' fairly to represent everyone in the group" (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2014; see chapter 3). In another interview — the aforementioned one with the local news station GMA, in which Kenneth made clear that he supported FF as a "believer" —, Red likewise emphasized that it is "a common misconception that we are focused on atheism. […] But it's not that we have as a goal the promotion that there is no God" (Red Tani in Santiago 2012). In these concrete contexts, FF members clearly stressed the group's "inclusive" character by pointing out that it should *not* be considered as an "exclusive" atheist or nonbeliever organization.

According to the official website of FF, "freethought" is simply "a way of thinking unconstrained by dogma, authority, and tradition. To a freethinker, no idea is sacred; all truth claims are subject to skepticism, rational inquiry, and empirical testing" (FF n.d.-a). However, there are, of course, different ways of interpreting, or going beyond this basic definition. As stated in the beginning of each interview in an online series called "Meet a freethinker" published by FF on its website, "[n]o two freethinkers are exactly alike; a group of freethinkers contains a great diversity of perspectives, so there is no one, official perspective shared among all of them" (see, for example, FF 2013a). Still, when asked "How would you define a freethinker?" most interviewees in the series invoked the same, or similar terms and concepts used in FF's definition quoted above.

Pecier Decierdo, a trained theoretical physicist and member of the *Philippine Astronomical Society*, for instance, replied as follows:

> When a person holds the scientific mindset, he is skeptical and forms his beliefs on the basis of empirical evidence and logical consistency. Notice that this is also the definition of a freethinker. I therefore think that a freethinker is just someone who thinks scientifically. For me, you cannot think scientifically and not be a freethinker and vice versa. (FF 2013b)

Similarly, Pepe Bawagan, another FF core member, stated:

> A freethinker is someone for whom no idea is sacred. Everything is subject to scrutiny. This means reason and science are the guiding principles for a freethinker's thought process. Freethinkers try their best to have their beliefs and decisions backed by empirical evidence. (FF 2013c)

Interestingly, in both answers, as well as in many of the other interviewees in the series, "religion" is rarely referred to, at least not explicitly. An exception is Garrick Bercero, trained molecular biologist and the "Affiliations Director" of FF, for whom a "freethinker is simply a person who rejects authority, tradition, and *faith* as sources of knowledge about the world. A freethinker uses reason and evidence to justify their beliefs." (FF 2013a; emphasis added) While according to Garrick, "faith" seems to contradict being a "freethinker," another interviewee, the former president of the FF chapter of the *University of the Philippines* (UP) branch in Los Baños, Ryan James Amparo, argued otherwise:

> A freethinker is someone who bases his beliefs and decisions purely on evidence. He doesn't have to be necessarily an atheist as most people would assume or argue. This is because freethinking is a process, not a conclusion. (FF 2013d)

As revealed later in the interviews, all four of the above-quoted FF members consider themselves as atheists or agnostic atheists, i.e. explicitly as nonbelievers. In fact, the second question for the interviewees, which comes right after the one about their personal take on the concept of a "freethinker," is: "What belief system do you subscribe to?" This illustrates that, on the one hand, "freethinking" apparently does not need to be directly related to "religion," although in many FF members' interpretations there becomes manifest — at least implicitly — such a relation. On the other hand, it is thus exactly this relation and the question about its shape, i.e. on the appropriate stance of freethinkers towards religion, that nevertheless seems of utmost importance. As Red

himself once mentioned at the beginning of an interview with the famous philosopher and "new atheist" author Daniel Dennett: "Our organization is a freethought organization and one of the things that keeps coming up in our discussions is whether a freethinker or a skeptic or someone who claims to be a critical thinker necessarily has to be an atheist or a materialist." (Red Tani in FF 2013e; see also chapter 6)

"A small group of atheists?" Public perceptions

At one of my first FF meetups, Red — under the discussion topic of "Building a better secular movement" — asked the participants, if they, in general, considered "freethinking" to be a good, positive term. While the vast majority — in fact, *all* — of the attendees seemed to agree with the term, one participant recommended to "make clear what the term means." Red pointed towards the aforementioned online article series called "Meet a freethinker," in which various FF members are interviewed and asked what the term "freethinking" meant to them. Another attendee suggested to collect those stories of FF members and then to "come up with a book!" At the meetup, Red also asked the participants about how they would think FF was perceived by the public nowadays. One attendee said that one of his friends still thought that "FF" was "just another term for atheists." The term "freethinking" was relatively new in the Philippine context, as another member reminded the attendees, and thus "freethinkers" or members of FF would still be considered "the bad guys."

So even though the term "freethinking" as such seems to be regarded as a suitable, appropriate term for the group by most of its members, they are also well aware of its ambiguity. On the one hand, "freethinking" is interpreted differently, sometimes even defined in a rather contradictory way, in particular when it comes to its relation with religion — thus the request to "make clear what the term means." At the same time, however, as the comments by the participants shows, FF members are often confronted with the explicit linking of "freethinking" with atheism. Especially among their families, friends or the general public, the latter term, on the other hand, is often associated with "immorality." (see chapter 1)

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a more thorough analysis of how FF is actually perceived among any wider public audience, in the following section I will mention a few examples which suggest that the organization, indeed, seems to be

perceived mainly as an atheist group. In a recent scholarly volume on "Atheist Identities" (Beaman and Tomlins 2015), for instance, the editors provide an exemplary list of "atheist organizations" from around the world in their introduction (Tomlins and Beaman 2015, 9-10). Interestingly, it is FF and not PATAS that is listed there.

Another interesting case happened in the context of Pope Francis' visit to the archipelago in January 2015, which was extensively covered by local and foreign news stations. Red Tani published an article in one of the biggest English-speaking national newspapers, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI), with the title "Why I don't like Pope Francis" (2015). About one week later, the newspaper published a letter from "a faithful reader" with "a high regard for the Inquirer" (Gomez 2015) who firmly expressed his dissatisfaction with the editors' decision to publish Red's article. In his letter he refers to FF as "a small group of atheists" (ibid.) whom — in his opinion — should not be given such space to voice a minority view.

Thirdly, under a website titled "The Struggling Dad – Just a regular Catholic dad trying to fight the good fight" (https://astrugglingdad.wordpress.com; accessed May 22, 2018), a blog writer directly engages with articles and activities of FF members in several of his blog entries. In a special rubric called "Atheists," one can find posts like "Sleeping with the Enemy: De La Salle University and the Filipino Free Thinkers," "The Nightmares of a Freethinker: A Truly Catholic Philippines," "Do Red Tani's Actions Show What His Big Mouth Says?" and "Red Tani is just using you guys and you don't even know it!" It becomes clear by just reading the titles of these articles that the author apparently — and similarly to the above quoted reader of the PDI — does not find much common ground with FF, and especially with its president Red Tani. While it would be interesting to engage with this website on several levels, what I want to point out here is that it seems to be mainly the "atheist" identity of FF and their agenda what the blog writer disagrees with. As stated on the "About" page of "The Struggling Dad," it is "the destruction of the Judeo-Chrsitian culture" and "a culture that is fast becoming subjectivistic and relativistic" that he is mostly worried about and which his "struggle" is aimed at.

In addition to this, some members themselves mentioned that they considered FF a group of atheists before they actually joined the organization. During one post-meetup dinner, for example, I was talking to Ramon, a first-time attendee on that day. He told me: "I was prepared to defend my faith." Still believing in a god or a godly creature

himself, he had expected "to be tested" at the meetup by other members of the group — which, in the end, he was not.

"Still Catholic…"

In addition to those public perceptions, also in FF's "internal discursive realities on the ground" (Müller 2014, 113), i.e. in its regular discussion meetups and the informal post-meetup gatherings, it is exactly this "atheist" or "nonbeliever" character of the group that becomes particularly apparent, bringing the ambivalence of FF's relation with religion to the fore. These formal get-togethers seemingly provide members a kind of "safe space" for the articulation of their identities as "nonbelievers" — a space they lack in other contexts, as I was often told. In the introduction-rounds at every meetup, this articulation takes a formalized, or an almost ritualized form. (see chapter 3) When I asked Red why meetup participants — especially, when it is their first time attending — are prompted to mention their "belief system" and their journey towards it, he told me:

> We do that because we know that a lot of people don't do that. Like, you rarely get to share how your beliefs changed, or like for some people, they rarely come out, you know, you rarely say: 'I'm an atheist now and this is how it happened…'; or 'I'm a progressive Christian now and not a fundamentalist or very conservative Christian now and this is how it happened […]' You don't get to do that, like you know that yourself, but we assume that a lot of people haven't articulated it. So, now you get to articulate it in public and it feels good to do it, I mean for you it feels good to come out, to own your beliefs. And it's also good to hear these stories, I mean it's kind of a topic in itself, like hearing people, the journey that people have, because doing that makes people reflect on their own, they hear some stories and then they remember theirs, and they're kind of reminded that they weren't always maybe atheist or whatever […]. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2016)

As illustrated by the aforementioned two religious attendees' feeling "out of place", most FF members' current "belief system" consists of an explicit form of nonbelief. Being able to relate to each other's stories and experiences as nonbelievers in a country generally regarded as overwhelmingly religious by the group's members certainly contributes to the community building and strengthening of a collective identity. The great importance commonly attached to the act of "coming out" — which I have described in chapter 1 —, and the possibility to do so in a "safe" environment point to

the fact that such an identity is based on a rather marginalized worldview in Philippine society, as it is in other contexts like the United States. Furthermore, this institutionalized form of talking about one's own "belief system" during the introduction round is complemented by numerous conversations in the more informal context of the post-meetup gatherings. Here, in a relaxed atmosphere over food and drinks, people often share – with amusement, curiosity or outright anger – their experiences on an even more personal and intimate level and express their thoughts and views on related issues like the involvement of the Catholic Church in Philippine politics.

In fact, it is humor in particular that seemingly constitutes an important venue for FF members to express religious criticism and reaffirm each other's "like-mindedness."[34] Jokes about religion and the Church are quite common. At one of the meetups of the southern chapter, FF Metro Manila South (MMS), for example, members were asked in the introduction round to mention their favorite fiction book from their high-school days. One of the attendees shouted: "The Bible!", thereby provoking laughter among the others. A bit later during the same meetup, the topic "Special treatment for religious organizations in/by the government" was discussed. One member pointed to the case of child abuse by the Catholic clergy to illustrate his statement that religious people, who commited such crimes, could get away with it too easily. Another member then added sarcastically that a nice way for revenge would be "to infiltrate the Church with HIV-positive altar boys."

While self-declared religious people are, indeed, welcome at the meetups, it is not only a rare occasion, it also sometimes seems to function as a reinforcement of the atheist identity of the majority of the group's members. At another meetup of the MMS chapter, for example, Elmer, who had attended a few meetups before, shrugged his shoulders when it was his turn to introduce himself to the other meetup attendees and to mention his "belief system". "Still Catholic…" he apologized tongue-in-cheek, provoking laughter among the others. "We don't mind!" one member assured, and gave an amused grin. At a previous FF MMS meetup, Elmer had mentioned that he would like to invite some of his "religious" friends, so that they would have the chance to understand what type of persons "freethinkers" really were. "To understand", he emphasized, before adding in an ironic tone, "Not to fight!" Elmer also admitted that he

[34] On the topic of humor and collective identity in the new atheist movement see Guenther et al. (2015).

himself had certain prejudices about "freethinkers" before he actually attended any FF meetups, imagining that they were "influenced by evil." This led the other attendees — visibly amused about his "confession" — to mention and make fun of what they regarded as some of the most common misconceptions about atheists and nonbelievers in Philippine society. (see chapter 1)

However, members of FF, and in particular the core members, put quite some effort into countering the group's "atheist" image whenever they have the chance. They do care about how they are perceived by the wider public and thus try to react on it in different contexts. When I asked, for example, Kenneth in my interview about how he thought FF was perceived as a group, he said:

> Publicly perceived it seems to be, *despite our efforts to the contrary* […] depends how hard working that public is, like if they seem to have studied the group, looked at it, then they'll, then they can see like, you know, the secular leanings, whatever… But, like the easy, cursory examination would show it to be like 'angry atheists' — which we do acknowledge as *a problem*. (Interview with Kenneth Keng, FF, 2014; emphasis added)

As quoted above, it was in the interview with GMA that Red Tani similarly spoke about the atheist image of the group as a "common misconception."

It is, however, not only in such "public" contexts, in which FF's atheist identity is identified as "a problem" or a "misconception" and is as such contested or debated. While the meetups, as described above, mainly reproduce the nonbeliever identity of the majority of the group's members, they provide at the same time a platform for actively discussing FF's stance in this regard, for contesting and challenging its atheist image, and for deliberating the group's general positions and strategies. At one of the meetups I attended, Red asked the attendees, for example, about how they would like FF to evolve as a group? One regular participant, who identified as an atheist himself, complained about the fact that the group consisted mainly of nonreligious people. Instead, he would prefer a greater diversity in this regard. Pointing towards the Episcopalian Kenneth, who was attending the meetup as well, Red replied tongue-in-cheek that FF was already practicing some "affirmative action." He then called upon the meetup participants, now in a more serious tongue, to point out to their friends and relatives that FF is not an exclusive atheist club.

In sum, FF's relation with religion is characterized by a certain ambivalence. This becomes manifest on different levels, as the examples in this section have shown. Both in their "public talk" as well as in the more "internal discursive realities on the ground," i.e. at the regular meetups and the post-meetup gatherings, FF members contribute to, and strengthen each other's, and the group's "atheist" identity, while at the same time, they continuously struggle with, negotiate about, and contest exactly this image of being an organization exclusively for nonbelievers. FF's oscillation between an inclusive approach towards religious members and a discourse in which religion is regularly held up as an object of criticism, and sometimes of ridicule, is reflected also in the group's very name. According to many FF members "freethinking" does not necessarily lead to, or imply unbelief. Still, the term is often associated, or even used interchangeably with atheism. Whatever take FF members might have on these issues individually, the question of religion nevertheless proves to be one of great importance for most of them.

In the next section, however, I will show that while the atheist image of FF has to be seen in the context of the group's foundation and early focus on providing a platform for nonbelievers in a religion-dominated country, it seems that on an official level — and looked at it from a broader or more longterm perspective — atheism or nonbelief as such become less important as identity markers for the organization. Instead, as I will argue, it is the group's socio-political activism under the banner of "secularism," understood as the strict separation of religion and politics, that is increasingly foregrounded in the discourse and activities of FF.

Building a community of atheists — or, secular activists?

As outlined in chapter 1, statistically, self-declared nonbelievers constitute a minority in the Philippines: recent estimations speak of 1% or less of the population (Wilfred 2014). Indeed, it is a common narrative of those FF members who regard themselves explicitly as atheists or nonbelievers that before joining these groups they thought, "I was the only one." This strong feeling of being lonely or marginalized in a social environment perceived as dominated by religion, led many of them to look actively for "like-minded" people, whom they eventually found in FF — or, in PATAS (see chapter 1). This underlines and points to the great importance of the "community" building dimension of FF and similar groups. The official website of FF, for example, emphasizes:

> Community is the lifeblood of Filipino Freethinkers. One of the most common things new members say to us is that they never knew there were others like them. It is undeniable that in the Philippines, non-believers are marginalized and experience disproportionate representation in the public sphere. However, even in their private circles, freethinkers experience discrimination and familial strife because of their beliefs or lack thereof. We aim to provide a venue where freethinkers have a voice and have the opportunity to have fellowship with other freethinkers and to know that they are not alone. (FF n.d.-b)

The last part of this quote resembles the slogan of a website called "SEA-Atheists.org" (site discontinued), which aims to provide "information about communities of non-believers in South-East Asia." Its front page declares, "You are not alone!" and some examples are given of what is meant by the term "non-believers": "Yes, non-believers: Atheists, Agnostics, Secular Humanists, Freethinkers, and with whatever name we choose […]" For the Philippines, FF is listed on the website alongside PATAS.

The aforementioned common association of freethinking with nonbelief becomes more than apparent in these statements. Considering the initial idea behind the foundation of FF in 2009 — to bring together members of several atheist mailing lists active at that time —, this is not entirely surprising. The group was first and foremost a group for, and of nonbelievers to discuss and exchange ideas with each other in "real life," to provide them a community. This core rationale of FF further becomes clear in one of the group's earliest campaigns, in which, similar to the above-quoted "community" statement on the FF website, the terms "freethinkers" and "nonbelievers" were used almost interchangeably. As described in a post on the FF website (Tani 2009), about two and a half months after the very foundation of FF, a so-called "Reach Out Campaign" was planned to gain (more) public attention and attract new members. The criterion for the campaign was that while it should be "aimed at freethinkers", it should likewise be "non-adversarial to non-freethinkers". One of the potential slogans for such a campaign, which the group seems to have agreed on in this regard, was the following:

> Don't believe in God?
>
> You are not alone.
>
> www.filipinofreethinkers.org

This campaign's motto shows how initially the group was formed quite explicitly around the "nonbelievers" identity of its members. As I have shown before, this particular identity is reinforced at the regular meetups of FF as well as during the informal post-meetup gatherings, while at the same time it is contested from time to time by its members, including Red Tani. However, as the group's founder and president, Red has also positioned himself explicitly as a self-declared 'atheist' in numerous public contexts.

Certainly one of the most impressive of such public appearances happened on February 4, 2012, when Red got featured in the popular talk show "Bottomline," in which he was interviewed about his views and experiences as an atheist in the Philippines by the show's famous host Boy Abunda. The event was advertised as follows: "Discover the life without a God this Saturday (February 4) in 'The Bottomline with Boy Abunda' as Asia's King of Talk Boy Abunda features the controversial atheist and 'Filipino Freethinker' Red Tani." (ABS-CBN 2012; emphasis omitted) And it turned out as a huge success. Red became known as an atheist, who did not hesitate to admit and defend his unbelief publicly. As he himself mentioned in a retrospective article posted on the day of FF's fourth anniversary, "I was told by a producer that it's one of their most successful episodes ever. I didn't get a single negative message about it — and I got a lot of messages" (Tani 2013). In a 2017 article on atheists in the Philippines published online at *The Atlantic*, Bangkok-based freelance journalist Michael French (2017) portrayed Red as follows: "Tani is perhaps as close as any of the Filipino atheists gets to enjoying a high profile. He appears on TV, writes a newspaper column, and maintains a heavy online presence. He jokes that he's known in the Philippines simply as 'The Atheist.'"

The televised interview, however, has not only boosted the public awareness level of Red to a significant extent, but the one of FF as a group as well. In fact, as FF members told me, after Red's appearance on TV the number of participants, which was usually about 30 people, reached at the following meetup almost 100. To some members, the appearance of an outspoken atheist on TV was also of great personal significance. In an article on the group's website, FF member George Seven (2012), for example, stated that "Red Tani's guesting on Bottomline with Boy Abunda was the first time in my memory that atheism was covered in the Philippine mainstream media." And further: "The airing of that Bottomline episode, I hope, will usher an era where atheists are

accepted and misconceptions corrected."

In 2011 Red and Garrick Bercero, another core member of FF had been invited — already for the second time — to give lectures at the Catholic-run *De La Salle University* (DLSU) in Manila. Both were supposed to give "a freethinker's take" on particular issues the students of a class on "Great Works" had dealt with by reading authors such as Jean Paul Sartre and William Blake prior to the FF lectures. While Red spoke about "The Problem of Evil," Garrick's talk was about "Morality without God" (see Tani 2011). In 2010, FF members had organized the "FF Film Festival," a seven hours film screening event at Cine Adarna, the cinema of the Film Institute of the *University of Philippine*s (UP). The festival was advertised on the FF website under the slogan of "Filipino Freethinkers Film Festival 2010 Challenges Religion, Celebrates Reason." The movies included such titles as "Letting Go of God," Richard Dawkins' "Root of All Evil?," "Fun for Heretics," and "Imagine No Religion." (FF n.d.-c)

While all these activities of FF and the appearances of its main representatives might have helped to raise public awareness about the organization's existence, they certainly contributed to its atheist image discussed in the previous section. However, there are also some indications that this atheist identity of FF is not only challenged in various other contexts, as I have shown before, but that despite its ambivalent overall shape one can in fact observe a more fundamental change, or shift of FF's relation with religion over recent years.

Almost seven years after the above-mentioned "You are not alone"-campaign of FF, I had a follow-up interview with Red during my short re-study in March 2016, in which we talked about what "kind of people" were attracted to FF. In this conversation, he mentioned:

> We do get people who have an idea of FF as a religion-bashing group, and when they attend the meetup, they ask why aren't we bashing religion so much? You know… yah, we used to do that, maybe during the first year, and then it got old very quick, and you know, like, you can still, you know, like if it's the, in the context of the topic, you know, you can criticize religion as much as you want, but there's no "Let's criticize religion!" topic, you know, dedicated to that. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2016)

At one meetup during my research from 2013 and 2014, Red had emphasized — similar to our interview — that in contrast to the online forum there had been no discussion topic that was specifically focused on atheism or agnosticism at the regular FF meetups

for 3 ½ years. In the follow-up interview, I also asked Red explicitly about his comment during the conversation with Daniel Dennett, which I quoted before and in which he had mentioned the great importance of the question about the appropriate relationship between a "freethinker" and "religion" within the group. He replied: "It's not so much an issue anymore, I think… I think we've taken the position that people who are freethinkers can reach a non-atheistic position… because, you know, like we have absolutely no issue with deists, for example, right?" "I think it really doesn't matter," Red further told me, "like except when you-, I mean, even the religious people in our group, they appreciate the ideal of secularism. You know, when there's more than one people, when there's more than you involved, and to the extent that there are more people involved, you should be more-, you should be respectful of secularism, because they may-, might not agree with your religious conclusions or religious outlook… so… you know, you might believe that there is a god, you know, but when you want to convince someone else, you have to use more objective ways of doing that (…)."

Kenneth, whom I asked about the main goals of FF and also for him personally, stated something going in a similar direction, but unlike Red, who referred mainly to the situation within FF, he projected his vision on to a more broader level, i.e. Philippine society as a whole:

> The easiest answer, say eh, is a society wherein church and state are fully separate and then all of the things that come with that, because we find that in societies where you do have a strong separation of church and state, then you get, then you get more respect for the sciences, you have a more scientific-literate population, you have a more… eh, you, in terms of solving the problems of society, at least an a Democratic society, then it becomes much easier to come to decisions, because you are not, eh, because you are looking at it from, from as objective a point of view as possible, or at least in places like, for example, for ethical issues, where you do need to make a at least semi-subjective stance, then at least you are not unduly benefitting or being biased towards one predominant religious group since eh, there are people, who believe other things in your society. (Interview with Kenneth Keng, FF, 2014)

Further, in the 2017 article in the *Atlantic*, which I mentioned above, the author quoted Red as follows:

> When I asked him whether he wants to become the Filipino Dawkins or Hitchens, he replied, 'A lot of people have been wanting me to be that kind of person, the cheerleader of atheism. I've done that sometimes, but I'm more of an activist for

> human rights and secularism than I am a spokesperson for atheism.' (French 2017)

What these comments point to is that atheism as an identity marker for the group — at least on a public level — seems to have become less important as such, while at the same time other aspects are put into the foreground, particularly the promotion of "reason," "science," and "secularism" — or, "RSS" as FF also calls it —, and the struggle for human rights. Indeed, as I would argue, FF is moving from a "religion-bashing group" and its initial idea of building and providing a community explicitly or mainly for nonbelievers as a minority in the Philippine society towards a more NGO-like organization focused on socio-political issues.

The socio-political dimension of "freethinking"

In fact, in their organized forms, atheism, freethought, and humanism — whether in the Philippines or beyond — have never been solely about abstract, philosophical world-views, respectively. While secularist groups have rarely been directly involved in party-politics (cf. Campbell 1971, 110), their diverse agendas were always connected to certain values and imaginations of ("modern") social life. Based on their propagation of socio-political reforms and their strong involvement in public conflicts and debates about a wide range of issues — in particular, the separation between religion and politics, or "secularism" — the secular movement has to be understood as "an essentially political phenomenon" (LeDrew 2013, 464).[35]

In the case of the Philippines, groups like FF — and also PATAS — seem to confirm this general picture of secularist organizations being strongly engaged in socio-political issues, while, at the same time, they refrain from any direct involvement in party-politics. As Red, for example, made clear in an article posted on the official FF website: "We do not have an official stance on politics — although most prefer democracy and capitalism, we have all sorts of socialists, anarchists, and even one fascist (that I know

[35] Several historians and sociologists have shown such a socio-political dimension of the secular movements in Great Britain and the United States in the 19th and 20th century (cf. Budd 1977; Campbell 1971; Jacoby 2004; Royle 1974, 1980). More recent manifestations, especially the groups constituted around the discourse of the so-called "new atheism," have likewise been analyzed as social, cultural, and political movements with specific agendas and ideologies (cf. Cimino and Smith 2014; Kettel 2013; LeDrew 2013; Mastiaux 2013). Based on ethnographic research among members of the biggest atheist organization in Maharashtra, India, Quack (2012a, b) has likewise stressed the socio-political dimension of such groups also in contexts beyond the West.

of)" (Tani 2010). While in the beginning, FF tried to be as inclusive as possible to attract new members and thus held back also from any collective engagement in societal issues, the organization's activism in this regard can now be seen, at least to some extent as *constitutive* for them. One member told me, for example, that it was because of FF's support of RH rights that he joined the group in the first place. Another one got to know FF only through their participation at the LGBT Pride March in Manila. The socio-political activism of FF, however, is important not only on such an individual level, but is also firmly anchored in the group's official mission statement:

> […] every one of our efforts aims to promote reason, science, and secularism as a means of improving every Filipino's quality of life. We wish for everyone to live lives free of ignorance and oppression—in a society where they are able to act and think for themselves, and in a country where religion and governance are clearly and permanently separated. (FF n.d.-a)

Here we can see how "freethinking" is strongly linked to a call for social progress, presenting "reason," "science," and "secularism" as the appropriate means for achieving it. How members bring these concepts together in concrete ways will be elaborated in the last section of this chapter by looking at their very successful fight for, and discourse about the so-called reproductive health (RH) bill, or "RH Bill." In trying to influence this public policy debate, FF was, for example, involved in a large advocacy network called *Reproductive Health Advocacy Network* (RHAN) and thereby also collaborated with religious groups such as "Catholics 4 RH."

The differentiation between "cultural" and "political" movements introduced by LeDrew (2016; see introduction) might be helpful to understand this "normative change" (Müller 2015) of FF, during which the group has been moving from "atheism" towards "secularism" as its core ideology. In accordance with this distinction, and based on the observations described above, one could say that in the beginning FF has primarily been a "cultural" movement focused on the atheist identity of its members and on building a community of "like-minded" people, thereby trying to give them a "voice" in a society perceived to be dominated by "religion." Only later, the group also started to engage very actively in certain social issues based on its propagation of political "secularism." In that sense, FF has increasingly become a more "political" oriented movement. However, as LeDrew (2016, 117) reminds us, these two different dimensions or "streams" of the larger secular movement are, however, not to be seen as

clear-cut nor as mutually exclusive, but rather as intersecting and as feeding into each other. Accordingly, the broader shift of FF from a "cultural" movement towards a "political" movement should not be understood as a complete or all-encompassing transformation. To a large extent, the group still is, and probably will continue to be a "cultural" movement. The regular meetups have always formed the basis of FF — the "bread and butter," as Red put it one of our conversations in order to emphasize their function as the group's irremovable fundament. As I have shown in the previous sections, these gatherings provide the attendees, most of whom are self-declared nonbelievers, a community, or a space for creating, sharing and enforcing their particular identities. To stay within Red's metaphor, FF's socio-political activism thus constitutes only the "topping," an addition to the meetups. And as such, it is not uncontested. In an interview with a long-term member, for example, we talked about the personal meaning of, and the experiences at his first FF meetups. He said:

> So, most of my friends now come from FF and we've known each other for years now, since the time I attended FF. Well, for me, it achieved the goal of being a social group for atheists. Now, of course, FF has other goals… RH Bill, and other social issues in the Philippines, but I'm not, I'm not really into that. I'm just there for the social aspect.

Although he might not have been in favor of it, social activism has nevertheless gained more and more significance for FF as a group, as this member himself pointed out. What is indicated in the quote as well, and what I have mentioned above, is the great importance of the debate on reproductive health (RH) policies in this regard. In the following I will show that, indeed, it is this public conflict, in which FF with its propagation of "secularism" and "human rights" appeared and acted most visibly and effectively as a "political" movement in LeDrew's terms. In fact, its support for the corresponding "RH Bill," and later the "RH Law," has become one of FF's central cornerstones and identity markers. As a FF core member put it in an informal conversation during my short re-study in 2016 when we talked about the group's immersion into the debate: "It made us!"

Reproductive health (RH) policies, the Catholic Church, and the struggle for secularism

I had taken the night bus to Baguio, a city located in the mountains north of Manila, and very popular by Manileños for its cool, pleasant temperatures compared to the heat and smog of the capital. In the morning, after a six hours ride, I thus look out of the window on the streets of Baguio, which we just had entered. I notice a billboard sign attached at one of the houses stating "Abortion is murder!" A bit later I'm standing around the place, where the bus driver has dropped us, looking for a place to get some coffee. A group of young people at the bus station, all dressed with purple shirts, scarfs, or hats, are taking selfies and pictures of each other. Still sleepy and somewhat disoriented, I start walking down the road towards the city center. Everywhere, purple cloths and flags hang down from trees and street signs, slightly moving in the fresh breeze that has just set in. At the small stores located along the street I grasp a look at the newspapers. "'Judgement Day' for RH" is written on the front page of the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

A few hours later I find myself in the midst of a cheering, shouting, and celebrating crowd of more than a hundred people, all dressed up in purple — the signature color of the "pro-RH" movement. Some seconds ago the Supreme Court's decision was announced to the protesters who had been waiting eagerly for hours outside the compound, which was located uphill, a bit outside of Baguio. There, inside the buildings the judges had been holding their meeting since the early morning. They did not consider the "RH Law" as unconstitutional like its opponents had claimed. As soon as the verdict was read out loud through the big speakers, which had been set up behind the fences of the Supreme Court's compound, the people started to sing, hug each other, and even some tears were running down the cheeks of those activists who had been fighting already for the passage of the law, and its underlying bill for several years. Among, or even at the forefront of the crowd had been Red Tani, and some of the other FF core members, such as Garrick Bercero and Kenneth Keng. Also Alvin Cloyd Dakis, the president of the newly founded humanist group HAPI was there, whom I had known from his guest talk about the issue of RH at the PATAS Humanist Conference in Cebu in 2013. Even a bystander, or curious observer like me could easily notice that, indeed, something "historical" was happening. After some time the whole pro-RH crowd sets itself into motion, first passing by the anti-RH protesters who had gathered in front of the compound as well, and then walking down to the city center of Baguio, where the celebration continues with speeches and artistic performances.

Figure 22: Alvin Dakis of HAPI (left) and Red Tani of FF (in the center) celebrate among the pro-RH activists in Baguio City on April 8, 2014.

Figure 23: Anti-RH activists have gathered in front of the Supreme Court compound in Baguio, waiting for the judges' decision on the constitutionality of the "RH Law."

The "RH Bill," which proposed among other things obligatory sexual education in schools and information about and access to contraceptives or other family planning supplies through government agencies, had been signed into law already in December 2012 by then president Benigno Aquino III, and thus became the "RH Law." Supposedly, Aquino thereby ended what has been called "the cyclical life of the bill" (Natividad 2012, 35): rejected, revised and discussed heavily within Congress again and again, it had also stirred public controversy for more than a decade. However, before its actual implementation could take place, the constitutionality of the law was questioned and it was put on halt until the Supreme Court's final decision in Baguio in April 2014 described above. That the bill was not able to be turned into law and implemented for such a long time is ascribed largely to the Catholic Church's resistance to it. Its official public organ, the *Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines* (CBCP), "represented the most vocal and consistent opposition from any institution to every government legislation and program on reproductive health matters" (Francisco 2015, 225). To many observers, scholarly and otherwise, the debate about RH policies thus exemplifies the particular and very complex relationship of church and state in the country: while a separation clause is firmly anchored in the Philippines' current constitution, its de facto realization has been frequently put under question (cf. Gorospe-Jamon and Mirandilla 2007; Quilop 2011). As has been argued by social scientists and historians alike, the Church's strong influence on the public and political sphere has to be seen in the context of a historically shaped, discursive "co-construction between Catholic identity and national identity," what Natividad (2012) therefore called "religio-nationalism." (see chapter 1)

It is this "religio-nationalism," and especially its manifestation on a moral level, the "hegemonic narrative of a Catholic moral order providing cohesion for a God-fearing nation" (Natividad 2012, 77), that members of secularist and atheist groups like FF — and also PATAS — are contesting. Their criticism of the Church's influence on RH policies and their own involvement in the related debate — and other socio-political issues like LGTB rights as well — is based mainly on their support for "secularism," and their promotion of "reason" and "science" as building blocks for modernity and social life. By articulating their specific agendas and imaginations of social progress as alternative frameworks for "religious" morality, secular activists seem to contribute to certain discursive shifts and some broader changes within the current religious

landscape of the Philippines. While the long-term effects of these dynamics on the future role of the Church in political and national affairs remain to be seen, Church representatives who speak out on public issues like the RH Bill/Law might increasingly be forced to engage in what Eleanor Dionisio termed "ethical multilingualism," the "capacity to frame arguments in language accessible to those who do not share their religious convictions" (2014, 30). The engagement of FF in the controversy over RH policies, where such diverse imaginations of society, morality, the state, and the "appropriate" role of religion intersect, thus illustrates well the aforementioned socio-political dimension of organized secularism.

That the issue of RH is for FF one of the most important socio-political issues — if not *the* most important —, where this agenda is put into practice, becomes clear already on the main page of their online presence. The topic is featured prominently, both in a separate section and in numerous sophisticated articles and podcasts. However, the group also became very active on various other levels, for example, by engaging in a large advocacy network called *Reproductive Health Advocacy Network* (RHAN), by participating and staging public protests, by organizing special events, posting YouTube videos, and debating with opponents in different settings. The fact that there is even a specific coordinator solely for this area, FF's so-called "Reproductive Health Advocacy Director," underlines the effort that FF put into trying to influence the debate. As mentioned in the introduction, it was Kenneth who at the time of my research held this office, and as such he even spoke at international conferences. Thus, it might not come as a surprise that among many members of various other local like-minded groups, whom I was able to talk to, FF's activism regarding the issue of RH was widely recognized and seen as a full success. Even activists, who otherwise uttered some critical views on the group's general approach, unequivocally acknowledged that when it comes to their RH advocacy, FF could only be applauded.

Before I explore the actual discourse of FF members about RH in more detail and situate it within the larger debate on these matters, it is necessary to give a brief contextual overview on some of the main actors involved, as well as an outline of some of their major arguments.

The debate on reproductive health (RH): a short overview

Several scholars have provided helpful general overviews on the RH debate (Genilo 2014), its more recent developments (Parmanand 2014), and more in-depth descriptions and analyses of specific aspects of it, e.g. the main sources of conflict (Baring 2012), population policy and the Catholic Church's position on it throughout the country's recent political history (Chow 2011; Leviste 2011), ethnographic glimpses on urban women's reproductive lives and their narratives in slum communities of Metro Manila (Natividad 2012), feminist perspectives (Peracullo 2012) or Catholic students' views on the issue (Cornelio 2011). As mentioned above, the RH Bill went through several versions and revisions. However, there are some key features of the bill, which are also among the most contentious ones, including public access to information about legally available and safe methods of family planning, and the distribution of corresponding products and supplies by the Department of Health, as well as obligatory sexual education in schools (cf. Racelis 2012, 260-61).

Besides the CBCP as the official public organ of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, it is the network under the name of *Pro-life Philippines* that comprises the main anti-RH forces in the country including Church affiliated groups like the Catholic Women's League or the Knights of Columbus, NGOs like Human Life International-Philippines or A Home for the Angels, the Buhay Party, and various Catholic private schools. While *Pro-life Philippines* as such is officially not a Catholic organization, its strong relation with the Church becomes evident in different contexts, and thus constituted an invaluable resource for the CBCP's opposition against the bill (Natividad 2012, 46-48).

The aforementioned *Reproductive Health Advocacy Network* (RHAN) represents, on the other hand, the major pro-RH actors, together with the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines (FPOP) and The Forum, a NGO with prominent public figures on its official "Board." RHAN includes more than 25 organizations nationwide with the Philippine Legislators Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD), Likhaan, a well-known, feminist-oriented women's health NGO, and the Democratic Socialist Women of the Philippines (DSWP) as its core members.

While regarded as the main representatives of both "sides," these groups are, of course, not the only ones involved in the debate. Various academics and "organic

intellectuals" from different universities have been actively engaged in the debate as well, whether collectively through official statements or individually, e.g. by stating their opinions in newspaper articles or the like (cf. Leviste 2011). Not surprisingly then, the discourse around RH policies constituted by this heterogeneous assemblage of groups and individuals — religious or otherwise, government bodies or NGOs — incorporates a variety of arguments, perspectives, imaginations and positions. Nonetheless, some key issues, around which most of the discussions revolve have been identified and thus will be shortly introduced in the following paragraph. What will become clear is that "[t]he clash of ideas stems from the largely normative position taken by the anti-RH forces versus the scientific evidence-based stance claimed by pro-RH supporters" (Racelis 2012, 261).

Constitutionally declared illegal, "abortion" is certainly one of the most controversial and contested issues in the debate on RH. While the bill itself does not argue for, or propose the legalization of abortion, many RH opponents suspect that this is the "real" agenda behind the bill. The representatives of the CBCP and their allies therefore take it as their duty to defend a "culture of life," in which the "sanctity of life" is protected under any circumstances (cf. Natividad 2012, 62-65). Such a discourse, invoking Pope John Paul II's warning about an impending "culture of death," illustrates that the argumentation of the CBCP against the proposed measurements of the RH Bill is based mainly on moral grounds (Bautista 2010b, 36). In pastoral letters and "Bishop Blogs," representatives of the Catholic Church and the CBCP raise their concerns about artificial contraceptives, regarding them either as "abortifacient" or arguing that their usage would lead to immorality, promiscuity and irresponsible sexual behavior, and thus ultimately would pave the way to a wider social acceptance of abortion (cf. Genilo 2014, 1047-48).

Besides abortion and the implied question of when life begins, another prominent, and not less contentious issue between pro- and anti-RH representatives — but also *within* the pro-RH community itself — is the relationship between population size, resources, and poverty. Proponents of this line of argumentation emphasize the correlation between the country's high population growth rate — indeed, one of the highest within the region of Southeast Asia —, its limited resources and widespread poverty. RH is supposed to provide people in difficult socio-economic circumstances with family planning supplies to enable them to keep the size of their family according

to their own financial capabilities. Hence, in this view, RH policy is one way of slowing down population growth. As indicated above, viewing and presenting RH policy as such "a poverty reduction scheme" (Natividad 2012, 56) is not entirely uncontested, even among RH advocates themselves. Many of them consider RH as an issue of human and sexual rights, and some therefore criticize the strong focus on the population argument (57ff). The CBCP and pro-life advocates see, on the other hand, corruption and political mismanagement as the actual cause of poverty, not the high density of the country's population (cf. Bautista 2010b, 48; Natividad 2012, 68ff). This "rhetorical manoeuvre" (Bautista 2010b, 46) of shifting the discourse from discussions revolving around statistics and economical calculations to issues of morality is, as already mentioned, characteristic of the anti-RH argumentation. Such an emphasis on morals and ethics can likewise be seen with regard to the proposed obligatory sexual education in schools. While RH advocates see it as a necessary step to decrease the high rate of unwanted teenage pregnancies, anti-RH representatives argue that it would pave the way to immoral sexual behavior (cf. Genilo 2014, 1048; Racelis 2012, 264)

In sum, as Natividad stated in her analysis of the debate on RH, it "became a platform through which the Catholic Church and affiliated groups pursued moral objectives about gender, sexuality and the family" (2012, 7). The most dominant voices on these matters, strongly shaping the overall stance of the CBCP on RH, came from the conservative factions of the Church hierarchy (cf. Bautista 2010b). As indicated in the introduction, one of the main justification narratives for the latter's unequivocal rejection of artificial contraception and the proposed policies has been not only that they contradicted traditional Catholic moral teachings, but — considering the country's overwhelming Catholic majority — would also go against "Filipino values" as such (cf. Francisco 2015; Genilo 2014, 1048f.) The successful blocking of the RH Bill, and later the RH Law, by the CBCP and its allies has thus, once again, raised the question about the role of religion — more specifically Catholicism — in Philippine politics, an issue that has been part of the country's history since Spanish colonization. (see chapter 1)

At the same time, the controversy enabled other groups as well — both from within and outside the Catholic community — to articulate their own, alternative visions of morality and society. In the next section I will sketch out some of the arguments brought forward by members of FF as nonbelievers and secular activists.

Secular activists in the RH controversy

Most members of FF and like-minded groups, with whom I was able to talk, considered the actual separation of religion and politics as either too weak or as non-existent at all. As described in chapter 1, they gave different examples in this regard. Still, one of the most prominent examples, where secular activists considered the political influence of religion, and in particular Catholicism and the Catholic Church, as a violation of the church-state separation and as depriving other individuals of their rights, is the issue of RH. As Red told me, when I asked him in our interview about how FF became engaged in this debate as a group, "after several discussions and debates internally, we decided that supporting the RH Law, or the RH Bill back then, was something that would be in line with our reason-science-secularism thrust. You know, it has all the rational arguments for it, scientific and statistical evidence for it… and most of the arguments against the RH Bill were just very theocratic in nature. So, like a win for RH would be a win for secularism, and, of course, reason and science" (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2014).

FF's general argumentation mirrors to some extent the discourse of pro-RH advocates outlined above. The view of RH policies as a way to slow down the country's population growth and thus, ultimately, to fight poverty, is, for example, figured prominently in the discourse of FF. As one member told me in an interview we had before the Supreme Court's decision described above: "One of the problems of our country today is the separation of church and state and how it affects the health of the population as a whole, because as we all know we have a huge population and there are laws that was passed, but was blocked by the religious anti-RH advocates, based on religious grounds, which is I, we [i.e. FF] think, is unconstitutional and is not a valid argument to stop implementing the law." As for pro-RH advocates in general, this socio-economic take on the issue is, however, neither entirely uncontested among members of FF. Even though Red, for example, is convinced that an adequate RH policy would, indeed, "affect our economy positively," as he put it in our interview, he likewise made clear:

> For me it's mostly a 'rights' issue rather than a 'solving poverty' issue. Like to me, rights come first. Like, even if implementing the RH Law somehow made the Philippines more poor, I would still fight for it, because I believe that everyone has, should have that right, you know, or has that right, they should get the

> assistance from the government, especially when they are poor. So, even if it would make us poor as a country – so let's remove the economic argument for the RH Bill altogether – I would still think that people have the right and they deserve these sexual and reproductive health rights. So for me, it's mostly a 'rights' issue. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2014)

Members of FF attribute the fact that public access to "these sexual and reproductive health rights" had been refused for such a long time mostly to the Catholic Church and its impact on the proposed policies. As Kenneth Keng, FF's current RH Advocacy Director, put it in an interview with a journalist of the news network GMA: "We say that FF is anti-any-ideology that puts at its forefront the systematic oppression of women and of minorities, and of their rights. And in that sense the largest most obvious institution that does this with the most degree of non-accountability would be the Catholic Church in this country" (Kenneth Keng in Santiago 2012). Propagating and pushing for "secularism," understood as a stricter separation between religion and politics in the country, is considered to be the appropriate means to confine this influence, and hence to guarantee people to exercise "their rights." This becomes apparent, for example, in an article published on the FF website, in which the author Jong Atmosfera (2013) writes: "The advocacy for secularism is an advocacy for rights. More specifically, it is the advocacy for certain privileges and claims that are being denied due to the strong influence of the Church in our political affairs."

The Catholic Church's successful blocking of the RH Bill and the RH Law until the Supreme Court's final decision described above has to be seen in the context of the specific discursive conflation of Catholic identity and national identity, which strongly shapes the overall relation between religion and politics in the Philippines. (see chapter 1) However, as several scholars have pointed out, in the wake of the controversy over RH policies, this "religio-nationalism" (Natividad 2012), or "Catholic nation imaginary" (Francisco 2014), and the Church's dominant position in the local religious field got increasingly contested both from within and outside the Catholic community. Mary Racelis has summed up these tendencies in a rather provocative, but quite poignant way in the following quote: "What has enabled a Catholic society to coalesce and openly challenge the authority of its bishops? Answer? The reproductive health issue" (2012, 267). In her article, from which the quote is taken, she considers the Catholic Church in the Philippines currently as especially "vulnerable" and assumes that the growing public dissatisfaction with its conservative stance on RH policies marks a broader shift

of power relations in the religious field (282-85). As she put it, "RH may only be the tip of the iceberg" (285). Church-internal scandals over child abuse or money issues, and, on the other hand, external developments like the growing popularity of evangelical groups in the country, all seem to contribute to such changes, threatening the Catholic Church's dominant position (Racelis 2012; Rufo 2013; Sapitula and Cornelio 2014, 2) — or, in Leviste's (2011) term, its "hegemony."

With their own involvement in the RH debate and their strong criticism of the Church and its influence on policies, groups like FF constitute a particular form of such counter-hegemonic forces. As Garrick of FF told me when I asked him about how FF became engaged into the RH debate:

> At that time I wasn't there, but how it was relayed to me how it was decided, they met up and they talked about the RH Law or the RH Bill, and how it concerned freethinkers, and where they agreed on was that the Church arguments that have been put forward are anti-science. They're just wrong about cancer and about the failure of condoms, which are, to this day are still being reiterated. Recently the Manila arch-, auxiliary bishop said that condoms don't work against HIV, so they're still sitting there, still spreading the same myths, and FF found themselves in a position to fight against the spreading of misinformation, the encroachment of religion on secular matters, how the government would explicitly endorse Catholic doctrine as state law. So that was a very-, FF saw themselves as a very important, FF saw themselves as playing a role, an important role in fighting against that, because — I don't wanna say we started it, but FF sort of made it a little more acceptable in society to criticize the Church, to criticize their highjacking of the political system, and I don't, at least personally, I've never, I haven't really seen it being as widespread before we came onto the scene. (Interview with Garrick Bercero, FF, 2014)

Members of FF further try to break up the aforementioned "religio-nationalism," particularly its moral dimension, and promote "reason," "science," and secular "human rights" as alternative frameworks to Catholic or religious teachings. Representatives of the Catholic Church and its public organ, the CBCP, whose position is based mainly on moral considerations (cf. Bautista 2010b; Racelis 2012), might be increasingly enforced to contend with such alternative (moral) framings, whether based on "religious" or "secular" reasoning. Or, in other words and referring back to aforementioned scholar Dionisio, they are forced to engage in what she called "ethical multilingualism." Secular activists thus contribute to certain discursive shifts and reflect some wider tendencies within the Philippine's religious landscape (cf. Buckley 2014; Dionisio 2014; Racelis

2012; Sapitula and Cornelio 2014). On the other hand, their socio-political engagement also shapes their own relation towards this religious context, and, as I have argued, contributed to its "normative change" in this regard.

CONCLUSIONS

> We at Filipino Freethinkers aim to promote secularism as a means of improving every Filipino's quality of life, wishing for everyone to live lives free of ignorance and oppression — in a society where they are able to act and think for themselves, and in a country where religion and governance are clearly and permanently separated. And as we are composed of nonbelievers and progressive believers, we have no consensus on the question of the existence of God. What we do agree about, however, is that all religious authority is *self*-appointed because God, if he exists, never personally endorsed any religion. Thus, being freethinkers — and secularists — we rely on reason and science to chart morality and uplift humanity. (Atmosfera 2011)

As I have shown in this chapter, the relation of FF with religion is one of ambivalence. This becomes manifest both on the level of its members' "official public talk," as well as in the more "internal discursive realities on the ground" (Müller 2014, 113). On the one hand, the explicit promotion of atheism is not part of FF's agenda, and the group thus welcomes "liberal" or "progressive" believers among its members, e.g. the Episcopalian Kenneth Keng. On the other hand, it is still mostly self-declared atheists who constitute FF's membership, and who reproduce, strengthen and re-enforce each other's identity as such, in particular during the group's regular meetups and the informal post-meetup gatherings. Through sharing their biographies and experiences as nonbelievers in a religion-dominated country, or also by making fun of religion- or Church-related issues, these FF members contribute to a certain "like-mindedness" within the organization. Providing a platform or a community for atheists, many of whom initially thought and felt like they were "alone" in a country like the Philippines, has been the initial core idea of FF when president Red Tani founded the group back in 2009. Thus, it may come as little surprise that the public "image" of FF still seems to be that of an "exclusive" atheist organization, although the question about the appropriate relation of a "freethinking" group with "religion," which is of great importance to many members, has constituted a subject for constant discussions, contestations and negotiations ever since.

Nevertheless, as I have argued, from a long-term perspective one can see that FF as a group, and thus its collective religion-relatedness as well, have undergone some broader, more fundamental shifts. By drawing on LeDrew's (2016) analysis of the contemporary secular movement in North America, I have described how FF is changing from a "cultural" movement — centered on identity and community building efforts around the minority status of its mostly atheist members — towards a "political" movement, with its members becoming increasingly engaged in social issues. As shown in the previous section, the most important and illustrative case of such socio-political activism of FF has been the group's official and unequivocal support for the controversial RH Bill and RH Law. FF's involvement in this public policy debate, in which the *de facto* influence of the Catholic Church on Philippine politics became particularly apparent, was based mainly on its agenda of pushing for political secularism, understood as the strict separation of religion and the state. As such it is supposed to be "a means of improving every Filipino's quality of life." While it has been part of the group's core ideology from the beginning, it seems that secularism has become more and more important — eventually more important than atheism. As Jong Atmosfera (2011), the author of the article from which the quote above is taken, states, there is "no consensus on the question of the existence of God" among FF's membership. However, as "freethinkers" and "secularists" they "rely on reason and science to chart morality and uplift humanity." How this agenda is put into practice in a very concrete way I have described on the basis of FF's discourse and activities regarding the issue of RH.

Inspired by Müller's (2015) work on the "cultural transformation" within the Islamic political party PAS in Malaysia, I have conceptualized this change of FF from a "cultural" movement to a "political" movement — as well as the related discursive shift from "atheism" towards "secularism" — as a "normative change." As such FF's religion-relatedness, which is at the center of its collective identity as a secularist organization, has to be seen as fragile, and as continuously contested. Some members, for example, do not support the group's increasing focus on socio-political issues since to them it is the aforementioned community aspect of the organization that is more important.

Further, there are factors on different levels that certainly have influenced, or contributed to the broader "normative" shift of FF — in particular, and in the words of Müller, "internal" ones as well as some "wider societal tendencies" (2015, 22).

Internally, for example, I would argue that the involvement of the aforementioned Episcopalian Kenneth might have had a significant impact on the group's relation with religion. At the beginning, FF members were organizing their meetups at a local *Starbucks* branch. However, after some time the number of participants grew too large and thus the group started to look for an alternative, non-commercial venue. Kenneth was able to arrange a meeting room at the Episcopalian Church, where he had been involved for quite some time. Although some of the FF members who are self-declared nonbelievers often joke about "going to Church on Sunday", this fact is quite telling with regard to the group's non-confrontational and more "inclusive" overall approach towards religious people. Focusing on "secularism" instead of "atheism" as the group's core ideology seems to provide an environment, where "progressive" believers such as Kenneth can identify fully with FF and its agenda. While there might still be certain tensions, discussions and ongoing negotiations with regard to the appropriate stance of FF on religion, they apparently did not prevent the group from becoming "the largest and most active organization for freethought in the Philippines" (FF n.d.-a).

Aside from the group's engagement in the debate on RH there has been another "external" factor that certainly has played a role in FF's shift from atheism towards secularism: the foundation of PATAS. The fact that the self-presentation and –positioning of PATAS as exactly the exclusive "atheist club" that FF does not want to be seen as, enables the latter to actively distinguish itself from the former on that basis. Considering that both groups primarily cater to the same potential membership in Metro Manila, i.e. nonbelievers, its publicly-declared focus on atheism on the other hand, makes it possible for PATAS to legitimize its very own existence vis-a-vis FF. Thus, while at first sight the relationship between FF and PATAS might seem primarily as competitive, such a view neglects its symbiotic dimension. As I will show further in the next chapter, both groups benefit from each other's existence since it enables their respective members to emphasize their own distinctiveness.

Chapter 5

"Good Without God"

PATAS between Atheism and Humanism

On Saturday morning I take a cab to the PATAS headquarter in Kamuning Road, Quezon City, where I arrive shortly after 7am. A few PATAS members are already standing around in front of the house in its shade, where the heat that has started to set in with the rising sun is a bit easier to handle. After some time the first van that the group has rented for the enitre day arrives, grey-colored, and — as quite common in Manila — with tinted windows. Before heading towards Rizal Province located outside the capital area, however, we still have to wait a little longer for Tess, who is supposed to arrive with some of the other members in the second van. Later, during the actual ride I'm getting sleepy again, even dozing off slightly a couple of times, and thus I'm barely able to follow the conversation of Jerome and Norman about how to improve the quality of the discussions on the PATAS online forum. Then, after maybe two hours or so, we finally arrive at barangay Balite, the place where today PATAS would host its ambitious project of a "Free Medical Clinic" for the very first time.

The open-air basketball court in front of us is already crowded with people, mostly elderly persons sitting on white plastic chairs, which are lined up along some tables. They are patiently waiting to get an examination by the few doctors who take care of them one by one at their temporary desks. These doctors are part of the barangay's *mayor's setup, as I am told. His staff members and supporters, who are easily recognizable due to their colored shirts, are trying to assist the doctors as good as they can. Apparently, the local politician had decided only on very short notice to co-organize the "Free Medical Clinic" with the members of PATAS, who, on the other hand, got the permission from him to conduct the event here in Balite in the first place. He doesn't mind PATAS' atheistic profile and agenda, as he later tells me, when I had the chance to talk to him briefly and to ask him about his personal thoughts in this regard.*

Figure 24: *Barangay* residents and PATAS members at the Free Medical Clinic in 2014.

Figure 25: Poster of PATAS at the Free Medical Clinic with the group's slogan of "we are good without god."

On the part of PATAS, everything seems to lie on the shoulders of Tess, not only the group's current president but also the only one with a medical training background. She just got back from her shift at the hospital, and tries to keep herself alive with coffee and cigarettes. Some of the other PATAS volunteers, eager to help Tess, organize the donated medical drugs that had been collected beforehand, and spread them out on one of the tables. Yek — who became the new chairman of PATAS after Marissa Langseth had resigned from that position at the end of 2013 — fetches a 1.000 PHP bill out of his pocket, puts it in the hands of Jerome and asks him to get some cold bottled water from the small sari-sari *store*[36] *located nearby. I offer Jerome my help in carrying the water back to the court, and while we are waiting for the store owner to arrange the 24 medium-sized bottles that we just have ordered, we chat about the clinic. As Jerome tells me, PATAS would like to incorporate reproductive health (RH) measures into the clinic's course of action. In his view it is here, directly within the community, where one could actually achieve something in this regard, in particular by delivering lectures on planned parenthood, or even by distributing free contraceptives.*

Later, I'm surrounded by a bunch of little children, running around wildly, playing, fighting, shouting at each other, and most of all making fun of me. I wonder, whether they are more amused about the paleness of my skin or the fact that there is not much hair left on my head. They grab my arms and pinch the back of my hands, laughing about the resulting white dots, which fill up with blood again slowly and only after a short moment. One of the kids snatches my camera and they instantly get busy posing and shooting pictures of themselves. Snot drops from their small noses, and when they laugh out loud one can see that some of their teeth are carrying severe cavity, some mouths even lack a few teeth. One of the boys, maybe six or seven years old, knows a couple of words in English, because — as he coyly tries to make me understand — his aunt is living and working in the US. All the others speak Tagalog only, which unfortunately I'm still not able to handle despite some private tutorials at the beginning of my fieldwork. Thankfully, Jerome not only helps me with the language issue, but also tries to calm them down from time to time when they are getting a little bit too intrusive.

Conducting an event for the local community such as the "Free Medical Clinic" obviously, and visibly, provides both hosts — PATAS as well as the mayor, together with the political party he represents — the opportunity to present themselves in a a good light,

[36] Neighborhood kiosk or corner shop that sells a variety of goods in small quantities.

and to bring their messages more or less directly across the people. Thus, PATAS had prepared a leaflet that contains the group's mission and vision statement partly translated to Tagalog.[37] It is handed over to the patients right after their consultation with Tess. The politician and his staff, on the other hand, seem to draw mainly on classical billboard advertising — several posters have been put up around the basketball court for the event. PATAS members have brought along their own poster as well, on which one can read: "We are good without God."

The successful organization of the first "Free Medical Clinic" in February 2014 denoted not only an important achievement for the members of PATAS, it also marked the third anniversary of the group's existence as such, which was celebrated on the same day right after the event in Balite. Also in analytical terms, the "clinic" is worth being looked at more closely, since many of the dynamics, tensions, and long-term changes that characterize PATAS' relation with religion become manifest in this activity, as well as in the related discussions about it. It is this religion-relatedness of PATAS that lies at the core of its collective identity as an atheist and secularist organization, and I will describe it in more detail in this chapter. In order to approach PATAS' positioning on religion, I will first highlight and discuss the group's official agenda of spreading atheism among Philippine society, and providing information about unbelief — as well as some of the corresponding ways and means of the organization's members to achieve that goal. Compared to FF's emphasis of secularism, this more explicit focus on atheism is certainly the most basic distinction between the two groups, at least on the level of their public discourse and self-presentation.

The image of PATAS as an organization that consists mainly of so-called "angry" or "militant" atheists — an image the group seems to have gained at least among some local activists — certainly has to be seen in relation to this agenda and the group's strong opposition to religion. In the second section of this chapter, I will contextualize this rather negatively connoted depiction of PATAS by showing how the urgency and insistence with which some of the group's members, indeed, try to bring across their message — and which seems to be perceived as "militant" or "angry" by some — is

[37] Speaking in socio-economic terms, the target group of the Free Medical Clinic, i.e. the clientele who were provided there with medical examination and free drugs, belonged to the lower strata of society. Apparently, they were not able to afford medical check-ups and treatments on their own, at least not on a regular basis. Since in the Philippines, receiving a good education is usually dependent on financial capabilities, being fluent in English is often considered as being a signal for the persons' higher socio-economic status.

embedded in a larger "modernization" discourse. By overcoming religious belief, which PATAS members generally associate with backwardness, the group aims to bring social progress to the country — a country which, on the other hand, is described as being in a very bad state, confronted with various social problems such as poverty or a poor educational system. According to some PATAS members it is religion that constitutes one of the root causes for the desolate condition of Philippine society, and thus their propagation and pushing for atheism as a form of *criticism of religion* is not a mere philosophical project, but has to be understood as a more general form of *social critique*. At the same time, however, PATAS has from the beginning also called for, and explicitly articulated a very "tolerant" stance on religion and its adherents. In a country considered and experienced as overwhelmingly religious by the group's members, this second dimension of PATAS' religion-relatedness might not only be an ideological conviction, but also an adequate, or even a necessary strategic option.

PATAS' twofold positioning towards religion thus has to be seen against the background of the particular cultural and social context of the Philippines. However, it can further be regarded as a local and culture-specific manifestation of one of the most central debates that characterizes the larger contemporary secular movement, as well as its historical predecessors. As sociologists such as Stephen LeDrew (2015), or Colin Campbell (1971) have shown, this debate revolves around the question of whether atheist and like-minded organizations ought to favor a "confrontational" stance towards religion, or whether they should pursue a more "accomodationist" approach — allowing, for example, an active cooperation with religious groups on certain issues (cf. LeDrew 2015, 62).

As LeDrew (2015, 2016) has argued, this tension between "confrontation" and "accommodation" is particularly reflected in two sub-groups or sub-ideologies of the movement: on the one hand, the so-called "new atheism", on the other, "humanism," sometimes more specifically referred to as "secular humanism." In the third section, I will show that the aforementioned *oscillation* of PATAS between a "confrontational", "militant" approach and a more "accommodationist," "tolerant" stance is, indeed, reflected in the group's firm integration into transnational networks of like-minded groups and the related appropriation of these "global" discourses. However, it seems that PATAS has undergone a recent shift towards emphasizing "humanism" rather than "atheism" as its core ideology.

In the fourth and last main section of this chapter I will show that this, as I call it, "humanist turn" of PATAS becomes particularly visible in the group's most ambitious project for the year of 2014, which I have introduced in the ethnographic vignette above: the "Free Medical Clinic" organized under the motto of "Good without God." Similar to the one of FF, which I have described in the previous chapter, such a shift can be conceptualized as a "normative change" (Müller 2015). By discussing some of the potential reasons that might have triggered this change I will highlight that the aforementioned embeddedness of PATAS into transnational networks and discourses, not only takes place on an ideological, but also on an institutional level, including, for example, personal and financial cooperation. Further, by presenting a former member's rather critical views on the organization's growing focus on "humanism" and humanitarian activities such as the "clinic," I will illustrate the contested and (potentially) ever-shifting nature of the collective identities, or identity strategies of secularist and atheist groups like PATAS.

"Atheism" versus "secularism"?

Considering the particular shape of the religious landscape of the Philippines as sketched out in the chapter 1, it might not be overtly surprising that it is the Catholic Church and its dominant position that represent also the main objects of the criticism articulated by members of PATAS. In an early online article on the organization's official website, for example, the author Ilving Zamora (2012) made it clear: "We will set our movement primarily against the Roman Catholic Church and secondarily against all other religious sects and organizations." What is also indicated in this quote, however, is that this criticism of PATAS is based on slightly different grounds compared to the official discourse of FF, which I have described in the previous chapter. FF criticizes the Church mainly as a hierarchical institution deemed as "dogmatic" and as constantly violating "secularism." While PATAS does that, too, it attacks the Church and "all other religious sects and organizations" also on a more fundamental level, i.e. as the main institutional representations of what the group's members consider the root cause of many of the country's problems: religion(s) as such.

In other words: both groups, FF and PATAS, can certainly be seen as recent

representatives or manifestations of a long tradition of *church criticism* specifically targeting the local Catholic Church. FF, however, largely remains within this tradition — at least publicly —, while PATAS as a self-declared group of atheists articulates and propagates, in contrast to that, a more explicit form of *criticism of religion*.

Loosely defined in the group's "Organizational Bylaws" (PATAS 2013b) as "the absence and/or rejection of belief in the existence of deities, or the personal position that there are no deities," PATAS tries to spread and provide information about atheism among its members, as well as among Philippine society in general.[38] Based on this official agenda, PATAS is commonly characterized as the more "exclusive" group compared to FF's "inclusiveness" when it comes to religious supporters. As PATAS' "membership qualifications" (PATAS 2013b) underscore, to become an official member one has to identify "as either an atheist or an agnostic," and one is obliged to support the organization's vision and mission. In fact, some local activists see PATAS as a direct offshoot organization of FF that has been formed around this issue. In an early article on the PATAS website — posted a few months after the organization's official foundation in February 2011 —, the author Sathepine (2011), for example, mentioned, on the one hand, this close connection between PATAS and FF as well as emphasized, on the other hand, the former's more "exclusive" orientation as the groups' main distinguishing factor:

> What exactly is PATAS? The organization is a group of non-believers who are atheists and agnostics, by their own admittance. These group of people mostly met through the Filipino Freethinkers (FF) organization, which has been around since February 2009, and remain to be members of FF, online at the very least. However, unlike FF, wherein non-believers and believers alike are welcome to their intellectual discussions, PATAS is exclusive only to confirmed atheists and agnostics and intends to seriously fund and pursue secular and atheistic programs.

In my interviews with members of both FF and PATAS, I usually asked them to describe their own group and how they would distinguish it from the other one. Many of my interlocutors had attended meetups or events of both groups, or at least have been aware of each group's existence and its activities, in particular through social media. One of the most frequent answers I got was the distinction of FF being more focused on

[38] I will focus here on atheism only, although agnosticism is also an official part of PATAS' agenda. Based on my impression, however, the latter plays a less important role in the general discourse of the group's members compared to the former.

issues of "secularism," while the focus of PATAS would lie more explicitly on "atheism." Red Tani himself, the founder and president of FF, for example, mentioned PATAS' more "anti-religious" and "anti-theistic" tendencies when compared to his own group:

> Well, when it comes to PATAS, it's, of course, primarily their exclusive, ehm, being exclusive to atheists and agnostics. And also they have a more anti-religious, anti-theist trajectory, or purpose, you know. They need to talk about religion more than we do. So, we don't necessarily promote atheism, they do. And the topics that they discuss are more atheist-taken, anti-theistic than ours. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2014)

Almost complimentary to Red's answer is the characterization I received in my interview with Tess Termulo, back then the president of PATAS:

> Well, Filipino Freethinkers, they're more of, their central pillar, if I should say, is secularism. So, they're more after the political issues connecting to secularism and they do not really advertise themselves as atheists, although a lot of them are atheists… because Filipino Freethinkers are composed of atheists, agnostics, progressive theists. So, they're more widely encompassing relative to PATAS, because PATAS is different from FF in the sense that we're out there as atheists and agnostics. So, if we have people we know that who are secularists but not really atheists we usually refer them to FF, so they could join the meetups of FF. (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014)

On an individual level, Tess herself is a very illustrative example of this being "out there" as an atheist. As the official president of PATAS, she represented the organization at various events like the regular meetups or some of the conventions, which the group had organized. Also on Facebook and the website she has been visible through various posts, in which she does explicitly refrain from using any pseudonyms. Further, in an issue of the AAI's magazine *Secular World*, Tess published a report on PATAS' relief operation at Villamor Airbase, which had been organized in the wake of super-typhoon "Yolanda," or "Haiyan." (see also next chapter) She also served as a general board member of the AAI. But even before becoming president of PATAS in the third quarter of 2013, Tess — as mentioned before, a trained medical doctor — had positioned herself as an atheist quite publicly: on her blog, *The Atheist Doc* (discontinued), she had been writing on issues of atheism, secularism, current events and social and political topics for several years.

In an environment generally seen as very religious, this openness about one's nonbelief in such a self-confident way is remarkable. As Tess told me in our interview in

2014, it was, in fact, only in the first year of college that she "came out openly" to her classmates, even though already in high school she was questioning — "at the back of my mind," as she put it — what her teachers were talking about in religious class. Pointing out to me that the school she had gone to was a private one run by Catholic nuns, Tess described how the environment there prevented her from speaking out these "doubts" openly:

> But I cannot really voice it out because I'm in an environment where most of the people, almost everyone that I know, are Catholics. Can you just imagine that kind of environment that even, even knowing someone who's a Protestant or a Muslim is such a rare, rare event. Because most of the people, everyone around you are Catholics. And I grew up in an environment not knowing other, other perspectives. I only knew the Catholic perspective. (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014)

Two of her classmates, one Protestant, one Muslim, who were allowed to attend the Catholic school of Tess, were considered "outsiders," as she further told me, "because they are not Catholics, they differ in some beliefs to the Catholic community." "So if," Tess reflected on her high school days, "what if I come out to them openly that I'm seriously doubting our, the Catholic beliefs? Then I would be considered as an outsider too, right? So I think at that time I didn't come out as an atheist because of that fear." This "fear" of becoming an "outsider" might have played a role also in her hesitation of telling her parents about her atheist worldview. While the "more free environment" at college, where she "got exposed to many different people" and "to a lot of philosophy," contributed to her aforementioned "coming out" vis-à-vis her classmates, it was only later that she expressed her changing thoughts also to her family:

> I think I came out to my parents when I graduated college, when I was about to enter medical school. That's the time I came out to my parents. But little by little only. Because they're very religious people. And I think I remember the reaction of my dad when I first came out as an atheist. He told me: "What happened to my daughter?!" It is as if he was implying that something happened to me, or something bad happened to me, because I think that way. (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014)

Tess' dad eventually accepted — or, at least tolerated — her nonbelief and also got to know that his daughter was not only a member of PATAS, but actually became the group's *president*.

The previous holder of this office, Kristofer Velasco — also known as "Rath" — likewise experienced a rather negative reaction when he told his parents about his atheism for the first time. Nevertheless, Rath not only became the second president of PATAS — after John Paraiso had left the organization —, but as such he even appeared on TV. In the political talk show "The Senatoriables," a "PTV Special Forum" broadcasted on February 27, 2013, he officially represented the group and was asked, for example, about the activities of PATAS and how — as nonbelievers in the Philippines — they selected the senatorial candidates they would vote for (Fleckner 2013).

Another form of publicly professing — or, rather displaying — one's nonbelief, which I had encountered several times during my fieldwork, is worth mentioning here. At one meeting of the LGBT subgroup of PATAS called BATAS (see chapter 3), some of the officers came together to prepare for a special event that the group was planning to organize a few weeks later. One of the core members of PATAS and, as he told me, very open about his nonbelief even among his *non*-atheist friends, was wearing a black wide shirt with a shiny print on the front side, leaving no doubt about his views in this regard: "NO GOD – PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST." Other PATAS members, too, were wearing similar shirts from time to time, especially the official PATAS shirt with the group's logo and its slogans. I further saw a PATAS member wearing a necklace with an "ATHEIST" tag attached to it (see figure 26).

Aside from these illustrative examples of individual PATAS members' personal "coming" and being "out there" as nonbelievers, also the group as such positioned itself explicitly and publicly as an organization promoting "atheism" in various contexts. In 2011, the year of its foundation, PATAS launched, for instance, two so-called "OUT" campaigns — probably modeled after the out campaign initiated by "new atheist" author and biologist Richard Dawkins and his foundation *The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science* (RDFRS) in 2007. Those campaigns are, on the other hand, clearly inspired by the early campaigns of the gay rights movement, where members of the community were encouraged to publicly "come out." (see chapter 1) The first event of PATAS on March 19 and 20, 2011, was even announced in an online post by the local news station ABS CBN News, stating: "For the very first time, atheists and agnostics in the Philippines will be 'coming out'" (ABS-CBN News 2011). PATAS set up a small booth in Rizal Park, or "Luneta," where interested visitors were provided with information about atheism and unbelief.

Figure 26: PATAS member wearing a shirt with the print "No God – Proud to Be an Atheist."

Following these "out" campaigns aimed at a rather small potential local audience, PATAS organized and hosted, with the support of some international like-minded organizations, a large conference in Manila in 2012 — i.e. only about a year after the group's very foundation —, attended by almost 200 persons from the Philippines and abroad. The event had explicitly been promoted as the "First Atheist Convention in Southeast Asia" under the motto of "Godless Philippines: Are you ready for this?" As such it was covered by like-minded organizations from around the world. In Germany, for example, the blogger Matthias Krause, who attended the convention in Manila, published his report "Godless Philippines: atheists meet in the most Christian country of the world" (2012; translation AB) in the journal *Materialien und Informationen zur Zeit*. This self-declared "political magazine for people without religious affiliation and atheists" (translated by author) is published by the German-based *International League Non-Religious and Atheists* (IBKA). The issue's special theme was "global – local: perspectives of transnational atheism" (translated by author). Also the US-based organization *Atheist Alliance International* (AAI), whose president at the time, Tanya Smith, gave a talk at the convention in Manila herself, reported on and mentioned the

convention in several posts on the AAI's official website, e.g. "Godless Philippines — bring it on!" (AAI 2012b) and "PATAS, A Spark of Reason in the Philippines" (AAI 2012a). Further, the convention even appeared on the local TV station, GMA News, in the form of a 2 ½-minutes-reportage, which included not only on-site footage from the event, but also a short interview featuring John Paraiso, the co-founder and first president of PATAS (Langseth 2012).

The ethnographic observations given in this section show that (many) PATAS members do not only profess their nonbelief quite openly vis-à-vis their (often very "religious") friends and families — despite the sometimes rather negative reactions they thereby experience —, but that they often also do so in a much more "public" or "visible" way, and often proudly. Beyond these individual or personal examples, PATAS has been focused mainly on atheism also as a group, as illustrated by the organization's official discourse and some of its activities. As I have described above, it is this explicit agenda that allows PATAS members to distinguish themselves from FF and their emphasis of political secularism (and, of course, *vice versa*). Thus it certainly helps to legitimize the group's existence vis-à-vis the latter, out of which — at least, according to some activists — it initially had evolved.

In a society commonly described and experienced as very religious, PATAS' explicit pushing for atheism, or nonbelief and the group's sometimes rather direct and quite straightforwardly articulated *criticism of religion* — e.g. "God is dead!" (see the ethnographic vignette in the introduction) — might have contributed, on the other hand, to a particular image that PATAS seems to have among local activists, and which I will discuss in the following section.

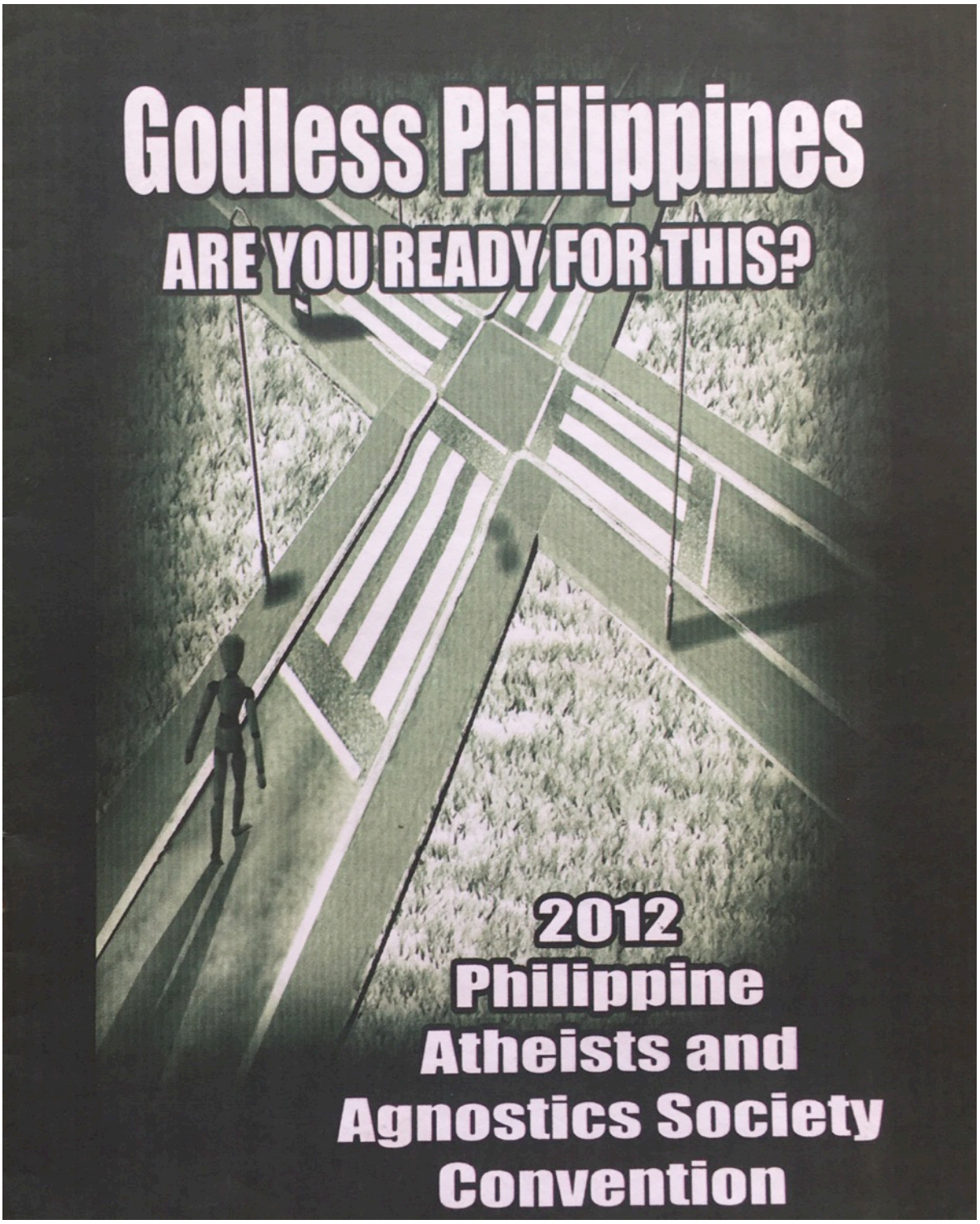

Figure 27: Front page of the conference handbook of the First Atheist Convention in Manila organized by PATAS under the slogan of "Godless Philippines – Are you ready for this?"

Between "militant" and "tolerant" atheism?[39]

Several times during my fieldwork, when I spoke to local activists, PATAS was depicted as a group of "militant" or "angry" atheists. Enrique, for example, a self-declared agnostic told me about the dominance of atheists — especially the "militant" ones — within the group. According to him agnostics such as himself were rather seen as "cowards" and thus wouldn't have been paid much attention to in the meetup discussions. Similarly, when I talked to a FF member, who agreed to meet me for coffee at the time of my pre-study, he said that he didn't really like PATAS because they were too "militant." One atheist, whom I interviewed, and who had attended some meetups of both groups, told me:

> PATAS has more of the angry atheist thing, and I've got into conversations about that, where they'll slam religion in some childish, or sophomoric way, and I would take the other side, just because it's so unfair, or childish — come on, religion isn't really *that* simple-minded! There are good people trying to good things there… but that's a lot of what I get, which, again, I still sympathize for, but it's just, you know, sophomoric, and (…), eh, they need a place to vent, ok, but me, I don't really need to plough through those simple arguments again.

"I'm not an angry atheist," he told me, "I got past that stage a long time ago, I'm just a nonbeliever." However, as he put it, he considered the "anger" of some atheists in the Philippines "understandable."

In these cases it is quite clear that the description of PATAS as an organization representing mainly "militant" or "angry" atheists has a rather negative connotation. Those terms are, however, neither ascriptions only from the outside nor do they have to be necessarily regarded as negative. For instance, in one of her early texts titled "The Rise of Atheism in the Philippines," the founder of PATAS herself, Marissa Langseth (2011), stated:

> I have found a tiny group of people who are as ebullient as I am with regards to atheism and humanism. We are straightforward atheists/humanists without frills or an inch of pretension. We have no masks or icing-on-the-cake sort of thing. We are proud militant Filipino atheists.

[39] Parts of this section are based on my unpublished 'magister' thesis (in German only).

At the end of that same text, she again emphasized: "And this is my legacy. My name is Marissa Torres Langseth, a Filipino, a proud militant atheist, a humanist. I am not afraid."

The label of "militant atheism" as such, as well as its meanings, have been subject to controversy and discussions also within the larger transnational secular movement (cf. LeDrew 2016, 143-48). In his "A Very Short Introduction to Atheism," Julian Baggini, the British philosopher and writer, defined it as follows:

> Atheism which is actively hostile to religion I would call militant. To be hostile in this sense requires more than just strong disagreement with religion – it requires something verging on hatred and is characterized by a desire to wipe out all forms of religious belief. Militant atheists tend to make one or both of two claims that moderate atheists do not. The first is that religion is demonstrably false or nonsense, and the second is that it is usually or always harmful. (2003, 101)

The majority of PATAS' members would certainly agree with professing the latter two claims, which according to Baggini's definition characterize "militant" atheists, insofar as they, indeed, regard religion not only as "false" and "nonsense," but also as "harmful" to Philippine society as a whole. According to PATAS, religion is hindering social progress, which is deemed, on the other hand, as necessary for the country. In one of the early versions of the group's "About PATAS" page on the PATAS website, such a view became clear:

> Due to major belief systems that we adopted from outdated religiosity, the Philippine society becomes detrimental to its aims of social progress and global participation. The Filipino belief system of fatalism instils on every Filipino that we lack control of our own lives and we are incarcerated to the destiny bestowed upon us. (PATAS n.d.; as accessed August 23, 2012)

Later in the document, it is further emphasized that the "more religion-based morality is imposed, the more the nation becomes detrimental. We promote skepticism and scientific inquiry, as well as atheism and agnosticism in society." (original emphasis)

That PATAS members in general do have a rather negative perspective on their country's current state, as indicated in the above quotes, can also be seen in several other, individual author's articles on the group's website. In very drastic words, for example, Ilving Zamora (2011b) envisions in one of his texts the future of the Philippines as follows:

> With poverty, hunger, desperation and hopelessness stalking all over the land — and the continued geometric rise of the population — and an impotent, nay, nincompoop government charged to address societal problems — it is not inconceivable that the Philippines — in a few years — will turn into a country of chaos and may soon transform into a nation of cannibals for lack of food.

Poverty, in particular, seems to be viewed as some of the nation's biggest problems. While in the above-quoted passage, it is the Philippine government perceived as "impotent" and the "rise of the population" that are identified as the main factors for poverty, Marissa Langseth (2012b) does not hesitate to point out what she conceives to be the problem in this regard: "Our country is still steeped in religion and wrought in grinding poverty — with skewed culture, ruled by 'technicalities of law,' scared of ghosts, entertained by western movies and their Filipino versions. Most Filipinos place their hopes on the lottery, fantasies, fairies, miracles, superstitions and gods, and their weapon is only prayers." Both on an individual as well as on the level of society, religion is seen as hindering progress because the belief in God or gods inevitably resulted in a kind of fatalistic attitude, as stated not only in the above-quoted "About PATAS" page on the group's website, but also as former president of PATAS, John Paraiso (2011a), has remarked:

> Superstition hinders knowledge, and what's more damaging is the belief that a so-called supernatural deity that watches every humans destiny. Success is seen as a manifestation of godly favor. This idea suggests that what you become is what God wills you to become and not because of your own struggle. So what happened on your efforts? Well it seems every Filipino's action is really not his own. So when failures and obstacles come, the answer is prayer — Prayer to turn God's favor back to you. It diminishes any sense of accomplishment and responsibility.

In his article, an author called Enrique Luis "Ecks" Frias (2011) put the view of many PATAS members even more bluntly: "The Philippines will never rise above its third-world status because the entire country is being controlled by its religion." It is not only poverty, however, through which the attributed "third-world status" of the country becomes manifest. Other social areas where PATAS members see much need for improvement are, for example, the sciences and the educational sector. To quote again from one of John Paraiso's early articles: "Whether we like it or not, the Philippines have very inferior quality of education compared to its Asian neighbors" (2011a). In another one titled "Science," he further assessed in quite sarcastically tones that "science here in

the Philippines joins the rank of Sesame Street and Sponge Bob Square Pants" (Paraiso 2011b).

The urgency, vigor, or even aggressiveness that some might see in PATAS members' criticism of religion, thus has to be seen against this background. In a country regarded as trapped in "its third-world status" and plagued by poverty and various other social problems, which, on the other hand, are attributed mainly, or even almost solely to the strong influence of religion and the Catholic Church, the atheism that the group is propagating functions as *a particular form of social critique*.

At the same time, however, there is another dimension of PATAS' positioning towards religion. From the beginning, the group's members have not only attacked their religious opponents, but also have repeatedly emphasized that they do recognize the religious views of their fellow citizens, and sometimes even pointed out the possibility of working together with religious actors on certain issues. Hence, and to speak again in Baggini's terms: while PATAS members obviously do think of religion(s) as "false," "nonsense" and "harmful," they certainly do not display "a desire to wipe out all forms of religious belief." This becomes clear, for example, in the words of afore-mentioned PATAS author Ilving Zamora (2011a) in his article on the PATAS Atheist Convention 2012, which I have mentioned above:

> Although unwavering in its commitment campaigning for freedom from religion and basically roots the Philippines's cultural, social, political and economic problems to religion, PATAS would also like to make it perfectly clear we recognize and do not oppose the people's freedom of, and right to – religion.

In one of the informal post-meetup gatherings of PATAS, late at night and after some bottles of beer, I've heard something similar to this written statement, albeit — in accordance with the given atmosphere — expressed in more colloquial tones: a member stressed that while he thought of religion as "a piece of shit," he still would never deny anyone the right to believe in, or to practice it. In the above-quoted article on "The Rise of Atheism in the Philippines," in which Marissa Langseth called herself and the group's members "proud militant Filipino atheists," she also made clear: "I want to see atheists live side by side with religion. WE will go parallel with religion, we will see to it that PATAS is a force to be reckoned with. However, PATAS will work in harmony with the Christians and the church for the betterment of all Filipino" (2011).

This twofold positioning of PATAS vis-à-vis religion, however, has not to be seen

only as a specific strategy within a specific cultural context, which the group's members perceive as strongly shaped by Christianity and the Catholic Church, but can further be regarded as a local and very concrete manifestation of certain patterns that characterize also the larger transnational secular movement. In his analysis of the contemporary atheist movement in the United States and Canada, LeDrew (2015, 2016) described how the current dynamics and tensions within and between the movement's main actors resemble to some extent one of the most central debates of organized secularists in 19th century Great Britain. The latter became manifest most famously in the dispute of the two leading activists of the *National Secular Society* (NSS), George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, who fought over the appropriate position of the organization towards religion and its representatives. While Holyoake favored a strategy called "substitutionism," which would have allowed not only constructive conversations, but even potential cooperation with religious institutions, Bradlaugh pushed for a more uncompromising stance in this regard, which, on the other hand, became known as "abolitionism." As LeDrew has shown, this 19th debate between "substitutionists" and "abolitionists" is mirrored in today's debate between those secular activists who propagate a "confrontational" approach towards religion and those who advocate a so-called strategy of "accommodation."[40] These two positions represent not only two polarized, and polarizing, "instrumental approaches to achieving particular goals," but they have to be understood also as "statements about identity" (LeDrew 2016, 140). Drawing on the work of Mary Bernstein, LeDrew thus calls them "identity strategies" (140).

While the terms of "confrontation" and "accommodation" for such different identity strategies — which are used by *external* observers like LeDrew as well as *internally* by activists themselves, and thus constitute both *emic* and *etic* descriptions — should be handled with care in order to avoid over-identification or -simplification, they are nevertheless helpful to mark two very prominent positions of secular groups towards their religious "others" along a continuum of (potentially, and actually) overlapping positions. In fact, as I argue, they are also useful when one looks at *one* particular organization such as PATAS, and its internal heterogeneity of individual opinions, views, and perspectives. Accordingly, the relation of PATAS with religion as an atheist group can be seen as constantly moving, or *oscillating* between those poles of

[40] Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale (2015, 216) speak of "moderates" and "militants" in this regard.

"confrontation" and "accommodation." In order to further substantiate this argument empirically, I will show in the next section how these dynamics become also manifest in PATAS' selective appropriation and negotiation of two opposing camps' discourses of the larger transnational movement: on the one hand, the so-called "new atheism," on the other, "humanism" or "secular humanism." As LeDrew (2015) has argued, the tension between a rather "militant," or "confrontational" and a more "tolerant," or "accommodationist" approach towards religion is reflected in these two sub-groups' ideologies.

"Global" discourses and Filipino nonbelievers' identities[41]

At one of my first PATAS meetups at the group's headquarters in Quezon City, which is located in the northern part of Metro Manila, I was proudly shown the collection of books by the evolutionary biologist and popular science writer Richard Dawkins, which form an important part of the organization's own library. "Only two are missing," I was told by a PATAS core member while looking at the white-board shelves in front of me, all filled up densely with more than a hundred books. Right below the bunch of books by Dawkins I discovered a framed and personally signed picture of the neuroscientist and philosopher Daniel Dennett. "To PATAS…" is written on the photograph.

Dawkins and Dennett, whom the historian of science Peter J. Bowler once called "the champions of atheistic Darwinism" (2007, 198-99) due to their naturalistic views on human evolution and social behavior, are — together with the publicist Christopher Hitchens and the neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris — commonly regarded as the main representatives of the so-called "new atheism." Sometimes sarcastically referred to as the biblical "Four Horsemen" of the apocalypse, all four of these authors have published bestselling books, in which they presented a sharp and rather uncompromising critique of religion and its organized manifestations.[42] With their

[41] Parts of this section are based on my unpublished 'magister' thesis (in German only).

[42] The "new atheists" and their books had not only provoked almost immediately a large body of "apologetic" responses, but also aroused a growing interest among social scientists (cf. Amarisingam 2010). Some recent works have focused on specific aspects of the "new atheism," e.g., its role in self-proclaimed atheists' individual trajectories to nonbelief, and its functioning in atheist groups' collective identity constructions (LeDrew 2013), its political dimensions (Kettel 2013; Plessentin 2012), or its manifestations in different national contexts (see, for example, Zenk 2012 for Germany).

propagation of science, reason, and rationalism as the only reliable basis for the production of new and valid knowledge, proponents of the "new atheism" are strongly opposing religion, which on the other hand is regarded as irrational, dogmatic or backwards, relying solely on belief rather than evidence and logical reasoning. While many atheist, humanist and freethinking groups around the world, past and present, have framed and frame "science" and "religion" as contradictory and irreconcilable phenomena, the "new atheists" might still be considered as currently the most prominent proponents of such a view. In his historical contextualization of the contemporary atheist movement, LeDrew (2012) thus described the discourse of the "new atheism" and its underlying worldview based on "scientism" as representing a particular strand, or tradition within the development of atheist thought, which he labeled "scientific atheism."[43]

Cimino and Smith, who have studied the reception of the "new atheism" among members of secular and atheist organizations in the US, asserted that the "new atheist books — and the enormous amount of secondary literature that interest in them has generated […] — have succeeded in familiarizing much of the world with atheism" (2010, 148). It comes as little surprise then that within the contemporary transnational networks of secular and atheist activists, the "Four Horsemen" have gained an almost celebrity-like status. They have appeared at several big conferences organized by like-minded groups worldwide. For instance, at the *Global Atheist Convention* held in 2012 in Melbourne, Australia, under the motto of "A Celebration of Reason," Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris performed as guest speakers. Hitchens, who had been invited as well was not able to attend because of his untimely death in December 2011. However, a tribute video in his memoriam was screened at the convention. The ideas and values of the "new atheists" have also been institutionalized, for example, in form of the above-mentioned *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science* (RDFRS) with its aim "to support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering" (Mission of the RDFRS as accessed on December 9, 2012). Hence, Cimino and Smith speak of how the discourse around the "new atheism," its

[43] Drawing on authors such as Jurgen Habermas and Mikael Stenmark, LeDrew provides the following definition of "scientism": "*the view that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge; that the domain of knowledge of the natural sciences encompasses human behavior, institutions, and value structures; and that the theories and methods of the natural sciences are the best approach to the study of society and culture*" (2016, 58; italics in the original).

central figures, and their bestselling books in fact have created "a new space where atheists are empowered and mobilized" (2010, 140).

Despite this great influence among secularist groups worldwide, the particular ideology it represents, in particular "scientism," and also the "militant" or "confrontational" tone generally attributed to its proponents, are, however, far from being uncontested. So-called "secular humanists," who are part of the contemporary movement as well, are — broadly speaking — more in line with the "accommodationist" approach towards religion described in the previous section (cf. LeDrew 2015), which allows, for example, cooperation with religious actors in the struggle for common goals. According to the aforementioned historical framework provided by LeDrew (2012), the ideological roots of this second secularist sub-group, along the "new" or "scientific" atheists, can be traced back to another, diverging 19th century strand of atheism that he has termed "humanistic atheism." Though, of course, not mutually exclusive, as LeDrew has emphasized, the two historical forms of atheism differ in important ways:

> While scientific atheism is built on the premise that religion is the antithesis of science and therefore must be de-legitimated through rational-scientific critique of its 'truth' claims (and thus 'confronted'), humanistic atheism recognizes the social nature of religion and thus directs critique at social problems that might be of common concern to secularists and believers. (2012, 83-84)

Some of the tensions that arise from these diverging premises are also reflected in the discourse of PATAS, in which both ideologies — the "new atheism" and "humanism" — are actively appropriated and articulated. As indicated by the observations presented above, and as I will show in more detail in the following sections, the former is particular visible in PATAS members' admiration of public atheist figures like Richard Dawkins, while the latter becomes manifest, for example, not only in some of their organizational documents, but also in the group's "humanist" themed conferences and in their more recent activities under the motto of "Good without God."

PATAS and the "new atheism"

> Our tools are logic, critical thinking, reason, science books, Richard Dawkins. (Langseth 2011)

It was not only in the above-described materialized or symbolic form in the PATAS library that I came across the "new atheists" during my fieldwork. Dawkins in particular

is very prominent in the general discourse of PATAS. For instance, in the writings of the organization's above-quoted (co-)founder and former chairwoman, Marissa Langseth, who had met the British bestselling author and public intellectual personally, he is attached with great importance in relation to the group's formation and motivation:

> I attended my first American Humanist Association conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, to see Richard Dawkins in person. He is the driving force of our group and our hero. I was successful in meeting him and have photos galore with him. These pictures were so valuable that our group in the Philippines tripled in no time. Must be Richard Dawkins. (2011)

Furthermore, on a more individual level, Dawkins as well as his controversial book, "The God Delusion" (2006), often play a significant role in PATAS members' narratives of their personal "nonbelief journeys." In his article, "My Journey to godlessness," the author and PATAS member, for example, wrote:

> Then I heard about this book called "The God Delusion" by Richard Dawkins. Got lucky to have bought a book then started reading it more than once and it awakened me further. I was not really that in depth in knowing what atheism really is before [I] read that book. (Batista 2012)

Apparently, for a young self-declared atheist, whom I had met at the end of the year-celebration that PATAS organized in December 2013, "The God Delusion" has likewise been of great significance with regard to his own unbelief. Dawkins was his personal "idol," he said, and as he further told me with a mischievous smile on his face, even one of his classmates had already begun "to doubt" after he gave her "The God Delusion" to read. Another PATAS member reflected in an article on the group's website about how Dawkins' book, in which he "found a sample '10 Commandments' on how to live one's life," inspired him with regard to his own work as a science teacher: "The last commandment from the list is the one I always remind my students about; and that is to 'question everything'" (Waking Nomad 2012a).

In January 2014, long-time activist, co-founder and former president of PATAS, John Paraiso, even hosted a public book discussion on "The God Delusion." In his introductory speech, he explained why the organizers had chosen Dawkins' controversial book for the event. It was considered tongue-in-cheek the "atheist bible" and was quite popular among nonbelievers here in the Philippines. Many had bought it, but not all of them have also actually read it, John sarcastically added. What followed

then was a lively discussion among the more than 30 attendees, sometimes stirring away from the book towards general assessments on the current situation of nonbelievers in the Philippines. While the views and thoughts on "The God Delusion," not surprisingly, varied individually and thereby mirrored the ambivalent reception of the "new atheism" among like-minded groups in the US (cf. Cimino and Smith 2010), what became clear during the event was that these books, indeed, "provide nonbelievers a general canon with which to unify, dissent, and, most importantly, communicate with one another." (Cimino and Smith 2014, 83)

Figure 28: Long-time activist and former president of PATAS, John Paraiso, gives an introductory speech at the book discussion of Richard Dakwin's "The God Delusion," which he and some other activists had initiated and organized in January 2014 under the slogan "Atheist Aware."

The formative potential of the "new atheists" on an ideological level further becomes visible in PATAS' enthusiasm for, and propagation of certain views that reflect the aforementioned science versus religion dichotomy. One can find many instances where such a form of "scientific atheism" is articulated. In one of the early documents published on the official PATAS website, the group's aforementioned former president, John Paraiso (2011b), for example, wrote: "Let's face it, science will not compensate God

but science is a threat to God. As science fills the gap with knowledge, the God of the Gaps is being kicked out. As more gaps are being filled, God is slowly left without a home." Similarly, another contributor to the website, stated in his "Journey to Godlessness" that "the more I appreciate[d] science the more I was convinced that there is really no god" (Batista 2012). Explicitly referring to Richard Dawkins, another PATAS member, Junn Dobit Paras (2011), emphasized in his "Story of My Atheism": "I believe what Richard Dawkins said, that evidence is only the reason to believe in something. No evidence? No talking snake or God."

To sum up: while there is still a need for comparative reception studies on how the "new atheism" discourse actually manifests in local discourses of secularist groups around the world, and potentially influences their positions and practices (cf. Lee 2015, 63), my initial observations in the Philippines in this regard seem to support — at least to some extent — what sociologists Cimino and Smith have emphasized in their groundbreaking study on the atheist movement in the US: "Taken collectively, the books represent a vernacular in which a diverse and potentially global […] population of secularists may invent and imagine their identities, narratives, and traditions" (2014, 83). However, as mentioned before and as I will show in the following paragraphs, it is not only the "new atheism" that is featured prominently in the discourse and practices of PATAS. Members also enthusiastically embrace its secular counterpart, "humanism."

PATAS and "humanism"

As a registered member of the global umbrella organization *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU), PATAS is obliged to support IHEU's aim of promoting "humanism" as defined in the organization's "Minimum Statement on Humanism":

> Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. Humanism is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality. (IHEU n.d.)

This definition of IHEU is explicitly included in the "Organizational Bylaws" of PATAS, which had been published on the group's website. There it is said: "The proper noun form of Humanism will be used by the Organization to properly denote that we are referring to the definition of the Humanist movement as lead by the IHEU which is differentiated from various definitions of the common noun humanism" (PATAS 2013b). One important aspect of PATAS' agenda, as it is further stated in the "Bylaws" under "Section 2 – Vision and Mission," is "[t]o promote Humanism." What is interesting is that this explicit reference to IHEU's definition of "humanism" and PATAS' pledge to support it, was not included in earlier versions of the group's mission and vision statement. There, the focus lied instead only, or mainly on the promotion of "atheism" and "agnosticism":

> Mission:
>
> - To promote public understanding about Atheism and Agnosticism; the elimination of myths and misconceptions about Atheism and Agnosticism. […]
>
> (PATAS Mission Statement as accessed on October 8, 2012 on the PATAS Website)

However, at that time, i.e. in 2012, PATAS in fact had already been a member of IHEU. PATAS' former local chapter in Cebu City (see chapter 3), for example, organized a small one-day conference in June 2012 at the Cebu branch of the *University of the Philippines* (UP) as a contribution to the so-called "World Humanist Day," which is celebrated every year on June 21 by humanist and like-minded groups around the world, and as such it is officially recognized and supported by IHEU.

One year later — and one year after PATAS' "Atheist Convention" in Manila described above — the group, and particularly its Cebu chapter members, teamed up with IHEU's youth section, the *International Humanist Ethical Youth Organization* (IHEYO), in order to host the "Asia Humanism Conference — Beyond Barriers," which brought together several delegates of different humanist, atheist, and secular organizations from South and Southeast Asia, such as the "Indonesian Atheists," "Secular Sri Lanka," or the "Society for Humanism-Nepal." In the official "Conference Handbook" distributed on-site, the aforementioned "IHEU Minimum Statement on Humanism" was printed on the backside. On the inside, the conference participants could find another version of PATAS' mission statement, which contained some quite

important and telling changes compared to the one I quoted above:

> MISSION: To promote public understanding about Humanism; the elimination of myths and misconceptions about it. PATAS speak for equal opportunity as citizens and promote humanism as an avenue to propagate kindness to all human beings. (PATAS Mission Statement as printed in the "Conference Handbook" at the Asia Humanism Conference — Breaking Barriers, Cebu City, July 2013)

On the second day of the conference, which I was able to attend in person, PATAS members also distributed the "Humanist Daily" to the participants, a B&W-photocopied newsletter-style leaflet that they had put together during the night, and which summarized the first day of the conference. It included, for example, a short essay titled "Humanism: A Better Alternative to Religious Moral Dogmatism," which stated: "Humanism, more especially secular humanism, presupposes that gods or divine providence is unnecessary in establishing coherent positive moral values" (PATAS 2013c). Thomas Fleckner, at that time the vice president of PATAS, had given a talk on the relationship between atheism and humanism, which was also summarized in the "Humanist Daily" by PATAS author Mike Madriaga. Since the short synopsis contains further important indications about how the term 'humanism' is appropriated, understood, and discussed by the group's members, it is helpful to be quoted here:

> [Thomas Fleckner] asserts that Atheism or Agnosticism is not the focus of Humanism. Atheism rejects gods, while Humanism does not require gods. He went on to say that there's a difference between a self-defined humanist and a self-defined atheist. By proving that atheists and agnostics can care about the welfare about other people too, some people argue that atheism and agnosticism can be a way to achieve equality. Thus, they associate it freely with Humanism. (Madriaga 2013)

While PATAS officially subscribes to IHEU's above-quoted definition of "humanism," there are obviously various interpretative nuances attached to the term. In general, however, and as I will further describe below, among members of PATAS it is associated in particular with moral acts and ethical behavior towards one's fellow human beings that are not based on any religious moral system or on the belief in supreme beings. As the group tries to show, for example, through its "humanitarian" activities, one can be "good without god."

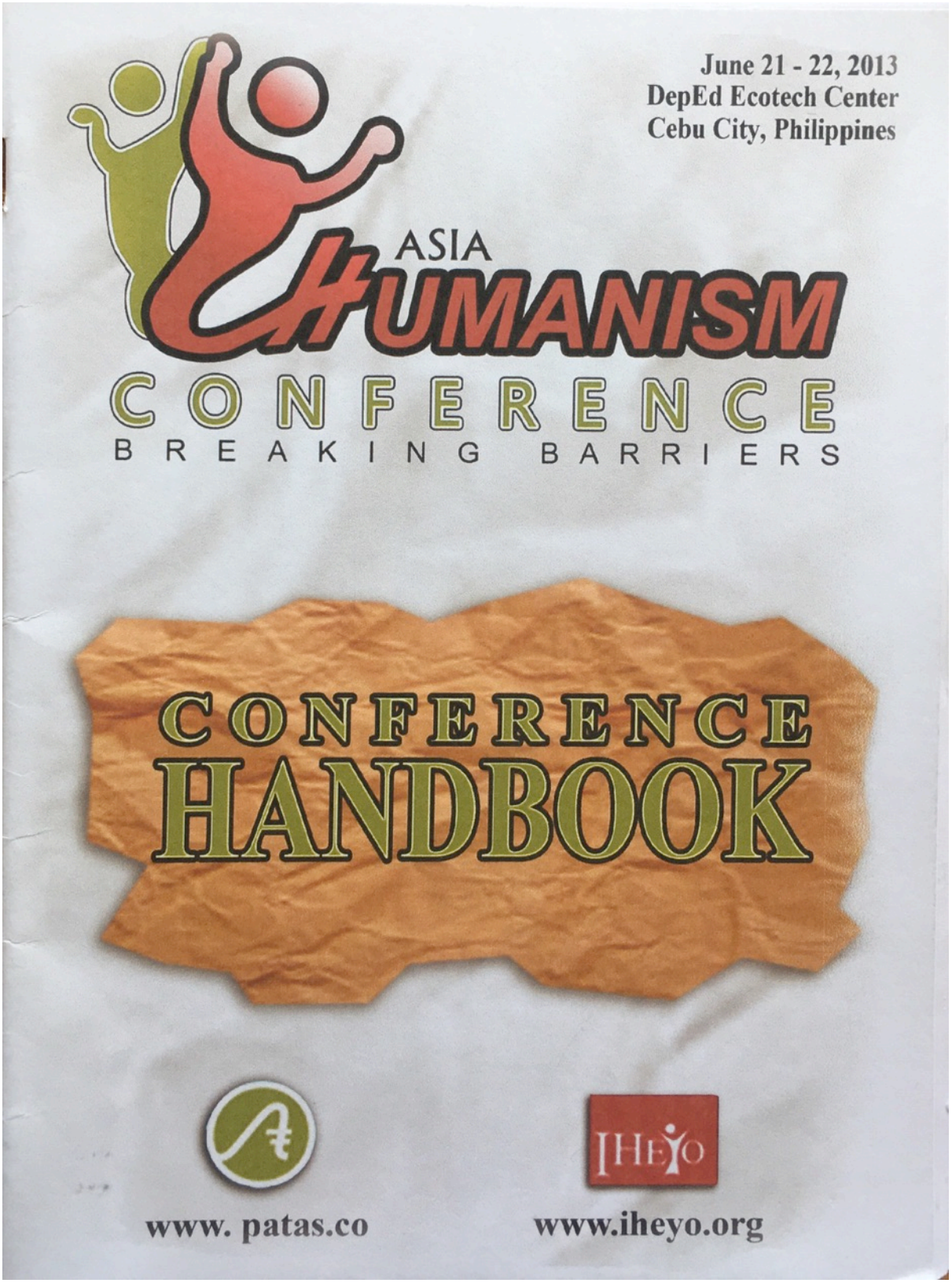

Figure 29: Front-page of the official conference handbook of the Asia Humanism Conference organized by PATAS and IHEYO in June 2013.

Humanist Daily

The Official Publication of Asia Humanism Conference 2013
VOLUME 1 Issue 1 June 22, 2013

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Sponsors

Despite the bad weather condition in most areas of the Philippines, which delayed the arrival of some local conference participants, the first day of the Asia Humanism Coference turned out to be successful. Gathering more than fifty humanists from different sides of the world, mainly the Asian region, the conference started with an opening ceremony followed by a plenary session on Introduction to Humanism and a regional presentation on the Reproductive Health Law in the Philippines. The day ended with a cultural exchange among the attendees of the conference.

Dizon Sparks Humanists to Back Human Rights

Sven Berg Ryen (left), Chairman of IHEYO Asia Working Group, and Jovelean Borces, Executive Director of PATAS, award the Certificate of Appreciation to Hon. Alvin Dizon (represented by his executive staff, Ailee).

Councilor Alvin Dizon, member of the Cebu City Council and the primary author of the Cebu City-Anti Discrimination Ordinance (CCADO), inspired humanists to support the universality of human dignity and push for human rights in his Keynote Address during the Opening Ceremonies of the Asia Humanism Conference 2013 at the DepEd Ecotech Center, Cebu City, Philippines. Dizon, in his message which was read by Ailee, his executive staff, also congratulated the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) and the International Humanist Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO) for hosting the event in Cebu. Moreover, he welcomed the local and international delegates with a warm greeting in Cebuano dialect "Maayong Buntag" which means "Good Morning" in English.

In his keynote speech, Dizon recalled the number of consultations and dialogues with different stakeholders of the ordinance to make sure that it is going to address existing human rights issues in the city. Considering that the discussions were able to gather an array of issues which include denial of access to some public services mainly experienced by people of different belief [and non-belief], sexual orientation and physical disability, it was agreed that an ordinance should be enacted to address the concern. Dizon recognizes that the

continued on Page 4

Figure 30: Front page of the "Humanist Daily," a photocopied newsletter distributed at the Humanist Conference in Cebu City organized by PATAS in June 2013.

This section has shown that the two most prominent ideologies, the "new atheism" and (secular) "humanism," which trace their historical roots back to the "scientific" and "humanistic" strands of atheism, respectively, and which characterize the larger contemporary transnational atheist and secular movement, manifest also in the discourse and practices of PATAS. The group's twofold positioning towards religion, which I have illustrated in the previous section — "militant," or "confrontational" on the one hand, and at the same time "tolerant," or "accommodationist" — reflects to some extent the tensions between those two sub-groups (cf. LeDrew 2015, 2016).

Currently, however, PATAS' seems to emphasize "humanism" as its core ideology more strongly, which is indicated, for example, in the afore-mentioned "Asia Humanism Conference" organized in 2013 with the support of IHEYO, the youth section of the umbrella organization IHEU. This recent "humanist turn" of PATAS, as I'd like to call it, marks an important ideological shift in the group's history, or in Müller's terms a "normative change" (2015). It further becomes visible in the organization's most ambitious project for the year of 2014: the "Free Medical Clinic," which I have introduced at the beginning of this chapter. By looking at this endeavor in more detail in the following section, I will point out some of the major internal and external factors that might have contributed to such a broader shift towards "humanism." However, as I will further show, this recent focus is neither uncontested nor should it be regarded as a complete turning away from "atheism." Rather, promoting the former is seen as the appropriate strategy to implement the latter more effectively in a society that PATAS members consider and experience as highly religious. Hence, the group's "humanist turn" should not be seen as merely an ideological, or philosophical shift, but also as a strategic one, or — referring back to LeDrew — as a particular "identity strategy" for reaching their overall goal of "normalizing" nonbelief.

The Free Medical Clinic and PATAS' "humanist turn"

After we have spent the whole day in the province of Rizal outside the capital for organizing the first 'Free Medical Clinic,' PATAS members and I are heading back towards Pasig City, which is located in the western part of Manila. The group's current chairman, Yek, a Malaysian businessman who has attended the medical clinic as well, invited all the

volunteers to have dinner at his private house, not only in order to relax, but also to celebrate PATAS' third year anniversary. On our journey back to the capital we thus pick up some chicken and several bottles of soft drinks at a branch of BALIWAG, one of the popular restaurant chains serving Filipino-style, rice-based meals. We spread all the food and drinks out on the kitchen table at Yek's place as soon as we get there, so everyone can serve him- or herself. While we are still chewing on bits of freshly broiled meat dipped in vinegar or ketchup, one of the PATAS core members gets busy with his laptop in order to upload on his Facebook site already some of the pictures he has taken at the 'clinic' before. Then, with our stomachs filled and a pleasant tiredness slowly settling on our faces, we all huddle together on the sofa, some chairs, and on the floor in order to listen to Yek, who has just began to deliver a long and passionate speech on the organization's current state of affairs and his own future plans. He makes clear that at least for now he wants PATAS members to solely focus on the successful realization of the Free Medical Clinic on a monthly basis. Standing in front of us, in the living room of his own house, his enthusiasm and commitment for this project becomes more than visible in his vivid gestures and the strength of his voice, underlining his statements. Yek repeatedly stresses the importance of the Free Medical Clinic as the appropriate approach for PATAS to gain more public visibility: people would wonder what the group was all about and eventually start to ask questions on their own initiative. This way, without much further effort, PATAS — as an atheist group doing "good without god" — would become socially more and more accepted.

In my interview with Yek around two months later — and a few days before PATAS would successfully conduct the "clinic" already for the third time[44] — he emphasized again such a less confrontational approach, which according to him constituted in fact the only possible way within the particular cultural context of the country. "The Philippines is 99 per cent religious," he assessed and then added: "not religious… a *highly* religious country!" "So for them 'atheism' is a threat… they don't know, nobody knows it, that's why it's really hard for Filipinos to accept atheists," Yek continued, and then he stressed: "So that's why I say: once we are doing 'good,' everybody can accept us." As he further told me, he had called upon the other PATAS members: "Don't convert

[44] To my knowledge, the Free Medical Clinic was organized successfully at least seven times until September 2014, i.e. several months after I had left the Philippines.

people! Don't *de*-convert people!" According to him, they should rather concentrate on their humanitarian activities instead of trying to convince people of the group's ideology in a more direct way: "Action speaks louder than words, okay? […] Go for more activities! Just let people find out who we are." "Because," Yek asked, "how to fight with 90, 99 per cent of the people? We're only maybe 1 per cent, 2 per cent only, understand? We cannot fight."

However, despite this focus on social activism under the motto of "Good without God" and "humanism," the ultimate goal of the group's efforts would nevertheless still remain the spreading of atheism, as became clear in another passage of my interview with Yek, in which he stated:

> That's why I say, this is the best way for us to grow. Because we were branded as Satan, we were branded as no-good people […] by most of the church leaders, okay? So that's why I go for this feeding program, medical mission and so on. Then, after we stabilize, let people know us. We stabilize… then we can start to organize like some of the big activities for atheism. That will be for the future, not now… now it's still not mature. (Interview with Yek Lai Fatt, PATAS, 2014)

Yek's strategic considerations in this regard resembled the thoughts of Tess about these issues, which she had shared with me in an interview at the PATAS HQ right before one of the group's monthly meetups. When I asked her to tell me a little bit more about how PATAS came up with this idea of a "Free Medical Clinic," she said:

> Ah, okay… So, I think some of the atheist members are starting to question why there's a need to do this charity work, because I think in their point of view an atheist organization, we should just concentrate on spreading atheism or promoting the understanding of atheism. Because since we're an atheist organization, right? But from my point of view, here in the Philippines it would be more effective if we can promote the understanding of atheism through humanism. (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014)

As for Yek, also for Tess a less confrontational, less "head-on" approach in advertising atheism might simply be the more appropriate and more promising way within the particular cultural context of the Philippines, as she explained to me further:

> So because, the reason for that is a lot of people here have misconception or they have misinformation about people like us, for nonbelievers. They would easily say: "Ah, you don't believe in god then you're the devil. You worship the devil, you eat babies." So it's really hard to counter, immediately counter these kind of misinformation head-on, like in your face. Because they, as I have said earlier, a

> lot of people are overly sensitive, so they would perceive that as a personal attack already. If you're gonna, if you're gonna start criticizing their religion continuously they will perceive that as if you're personally attacking them and they are less likely to listen to us. So how are we gonna promote atheism that way? Through humanism, like the Free Medical Clinic. They would be what we see as human beings and then when, when they see that "Oh, they're not so bad after all," then maybe at that time we could easily open up a discussion. So we could more effectively promote our ideas to them, rather than going through the head-on approach. (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014)

Later in 2014, PATAS author Ric Caliolio, who at that time had been responsible for organizing the regular meetups in Manila, wrote a series of short articles on "Building a Humanist Community." In the first part, under the heading of "Purpose and Programs of the Organization," he also stressed the importance of breaking up the common link between morality and religion through "humanism" and "humanitarian" acts, demonstrating that people without any beliefs in a "supreme being" can *be*, and *do* "good" as well:

> At its very basic, PATAS is simply a group of atheists and agnostics in the Philippines. Why then should we build a humanist community? We need to do so because connecting our atheism and agnosticism to the general public through the bridge of humanism is what our country needs to have a healthy society.
>
> A humanist community will inevitably and voluntarily demonstrate that humanitarian acts are gestures naturally done by humans without the need for any superstitious or supernatural beliefs or claims, such as the "afterlife" or the so-called "divine blessings". This will help change the common notion that the cause of good is an unknowable supreme being. The credit for being good will then be redirected back to simply being human. (Caliolio 2014)

While the ultimate goal of PATAS' agenda — the promotion of atheism among Philippine society — seems to remain largely intact, the views on how to achieve it most effectively, however, do vary, and are subject of debate within the group. As Tess mentioned in the quote above, "some of the atheist members are starting to question why there's a need to do this charity work."

Mitch, for example, a member who had been very much involved in PATAS in the beginning, but later withdrew himself from any activities, had a rather critical view on the group's increasing focus on "humanism." In an informal context, over cups of freshly infused instant coffee, with several other members and former members of PATAS, he became quite passionate about what he thought of as an alarming development for the

organization. While, on the one hand, he admitted that the "Free Medical Clinic" as such was, of course, a good thing, he strongly doubted that it would bring PATAS any step further towards its ultimate goal, which according to him still was — or at least should be — the spread of atheism, and to provide the public with information about unbelief. "Not all atheists are humanists," he stressed and then added that it was in particular some of the "rich atheists" who did not like "humanism." He mentioned a few examples of people he personally knew, who would consider themselves as "atheists," but not as "humanists." According to Mitch, this was actually the reason why they did, for example, not want to join PATAS. By putting too much effort in trying to be "good" or to be "nice," he asserted, one inevitably prevented oneself from actually *criticizing* the Church as the real problem. Pointing towards the historical development and current situation of atheism in the US, he saw the recent focus on humanism of local groups like PATAS simply as a "jumping on the bandwagon." In his view, however, this was a kind of "shortcutting" compared to the US. There, in the beginning, "angry atheists" like Thomas Paine had explicitly criticized Christianity in their writings — in fact, it was only recently that people in the US focused more on humanism, as Mitch told us. In contrast to that, local groups would not bring atheism, and related topics into the public discourse at all. At this point, another member at the table pointed out the "Four Horsemen" of the "new atheism," who all came from the US or UK. Mitch instantly added to this comment that it is such phenomena that you have only "there." He asked: "What do we have here?" Obviously referring to the "Free Medical Clinic" of PATAS, he replied to his own question in a voice that seemed to shift between sarcasm and resignation that "here" in the Philippines we would just have "good" people distributing medicaments among "poor" people. The criticism of Mitch about PATAS' "humanist turn" illustrates the contested nature of this "normative change" (Müller 2015).

Aside from the new chairman's pushing for the "Free Medical Clinic," and some of the core members' support of "humanism" as the more context-sensitive strategy for the group, there is another very important, more *external* factor for PATAS' shift in this regard. As illustrated before, since the beginning the organization has not only drawn on "global" discourses such as the "new atheism" and "secular humanism," but also has put much effort in establishing and maintaining international cooperative relations with like-minded groups — on a personal, financial, as well as an ideological level. This embeddedness into the transnational secular movement on various levels, proved to be

very helpful for organizing the two bigger conferences in Manila and Cebu that I have described above. Thomas Fleckner, who was personally well connected with some atheist and secular organizations in Europe, further launched an attempt to establish a cooperation between PATAS and the *German Humanist Association* (HVD), in particular for promoting the group's project of the "Free Medical Clinic." Thomas himself had been a member of one of the HVD's local groups in Germany when he was still living there, and after his move to the Philippines he was portrayed in an interview in 2013 on the website of the official magazine of the HVD called "diesseits." In the interview he talked about the general situation of nonbelievers in the country, on PATAS, and also about his own role within the organization (Platzek 2013; in German only). The editor-in-chief of "diesseits," Arik Platzek, who had conducted the interview with Thomas, also published a three-page article on the "Free Medical Clinic" in a 2014 issue of the magazine, with full-color pictures of PATAS members in action (Platzek 2014; in German only). During one of his visits to his home country, Thomas even went to Berlin to visit the HVD HQ for personal talks about PATAS, and potential cooperations. Shortly after Thomas' return to Manila, PATAS officers were talking in an informal meeting about his trip and the possible connection with the HVD. Thus, the group agreed on the need to emphasize "humanism" instead of "atheism," since the latter term was considered to have too negative a connotation. With the prospect of receiving (financial) support from abroad for their activities, one member even asked whether the group should change its name in this regard.[45]

This shows that PATAS' "humanist turn" as driven by both internal factors such as a restructuring within the group's leadership — i.e. the new chairman and his personal agenda —, and by external ones such as the aforementioned efforts in putting up institutional cooperations with like-minded groups in other countries, includes ideological as well as pragmatic, or strategic dimensions.

[45] However, as far as I know, the cooperation between PATAS and the HVD was in the end *not* established.

To sum up: the more explicit focus of PATAS on "atheism" is an important distinguishing factor vis-a-vis FF and its increasing focus on "secularism." As I have shown, members of both groups draw on this discursive differentiation. PATAS' more direct form of religious criticism — compared to FF's more "inclusive" over-all approach, for example, with regard to religious members — contributed, on the other hand, to the image of the group's membership as comprised mainly of so-called "militant," or "angry" atheists. PATAS members' sometimes straightforward way of criticizing, or accusing religion, however, has to be seen in the context of the group's "modernization" discourse, according to which religion is hindering social progress. Many members of PATAS, as I have described, regard such social progress and modernization efforts as absolutely necessary since they perceive the general status of their country as desolate.

The related debate about the appropriate position of PATAS as an atheist organization towards religion — i.e. whether the group should favor such a "militant," and "confrontational" stance over a more "tolerant," "accommodationist" approach in this regard — further reflects one of the most central tensions that run through the entire history of the larger transnational secular movement. It became manifest, for example, in the 19th century debates among organized secularists in the UK about "substitutionism" and "abolitionism," which, on the other hand, is mirrored in contemporary debates between so-called "new atheists" and secular "humanists" (cf. LeDrew 2015, 2016). The respective discourses of, and around these two current "camps" are actively appropriated by members of PATAS and frequently articulated in their narratives. It is "humanism," however, which has become the group's recent main focus, as can be seen most clearly in the organization of a "Free Medical Clinic" under the motto of "Good without God," with which PATAS activists want to convince their fellow citizens of the morality of nonbelievers in a less confrontational way.

This "humanist turn" of PATAS can be conceptualized as a "normative change" similar to FF's shift from "atheism" towards "secularism," which I have described in the previous chapter with reference to Dominik Müller's ethnographic work on the political party PAS in Malaysia. As such, PATAS' shifting relation with, or its positioning on religion has to be seen as influenced by several internal and external factors, most notably the enthusiasm of the group's new chairman for a stronger focus on

"humanism" instead of "atheism," as well as certain institutional connections with like-minded groups in other countries. Further, and as in the case of FF, this "normative change" is not uncontested, which becomes clear, for example, in some members' more fundamental questioning of the group's engagement in humanitarian activities. According to their views PATAS as an atheist group should focus solely on the spreading of atheism, and public information about it.

Drawing on the analytical distinction between different identity strategies of secularist organizations outlined in the introduction of this thesis, PATAS' initial focus on "atheism" is based mainly on the minority status of nonbelievers in Philippine society, while the group's "humanist" activities under the slogan of "Good without God" bring the issue of morality to the foreground. In the conceptual framework of LeDrew (2016), who distinguished between "cultural" and "political" oriented movements, one could say that PATAS largely remains the former — in contrast to FF, who with the group's increasing focus on issues of secularism is becoming a more "political" one. Thus, PATAS' "normative change" can be considered as a shift between the two different aspects, strategies, or foci that primarily characterize a "cultural" oriented secularist movement: on the one hand, the focus on "constructing and defending shared identities" (112) of nonbelievers as a minority group in a highly religious society, and, on the other hand, efforts in "transforming beliefs and values" (112) about atheists, with which they are commonly confronted in society, e.g. the association of nonbelief with immorality.

While the different and shifting relations of FF and PATAS with religion and the local religious context, which I have described in this and the previous chapter, are central in distinguishing the two groups vis-a-vis each other — since they lie at the core of their respective collective identities as secularist organizations —, there are, however, other differences, or discursive differentiations that I came across during my research. As I will show in the following chapter, beyond their specific (identity) strategies of normalizing nonbelief, members of both organizations often characterize FF and PATAS by pointing out a different milieu or social class, from which each group supposedly draws its members, and/or is focused on in its activities, respectively. These distinctions, as will also become clear, are strongly intertwined with both groups' histories as atheist and secularist organizations in the religious and cultural context of the Philippines, and their changing strategies and positions in this regard.

Chapter 6

"A Bunch of Rich Kids?"

Social Class, Agency, and Different Kinds of Atheism

On November 7, 2013, "Yolanda" — internationally-known as "Haiyan" — hit the Philippines at peak intensity with 10-minute sustained wind speeds up to 230 km/h. This so-called super-typhoon, globally one of the strongest typhoons ever recorded, became the most deadly calamity in the country's recent history, killing more than 6000 people and leaving large parts of the Visayan Islands devastated. Soon after the catastrophe — with the death toll still rising almost daily — both groups, FF and PATAS, organized activities in Manila to help their fellow citizens affected by the disaster.

The particular form of each group's activities, which I will describe in more detail in the first section of this chapter, illustrates certain differences that some activists had pointed out to me on various occasions: according to them, PATAS is a "grassroots"-oriented organization more focused on local communities, as it becomes manifest, for example, not only in its humanitarian response to "Yolanda," but also in the group's ambitious project of the "Free Medical Clinic" discussed in the previous chapter. FF, in contrast to that, is seen as the more "intellectually" inclined group engaged in sophisticated discussions on a variety of philosophical, scientific, and political topics — exemplified not only by its campaign in support of the typhoon's victims, but in particular by their regular meetups.

What I will show in this chapter is how an analysis of these characterizations of FF and PATAS, respectively, allows for a more complete picture of both organizations, and how it contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between them. As will become clear, such discursive distinctions *beyond* each group's specific religion-relatedness as outlined in the previous chapters, are strongly tied to issues of "social class." FF, for example, was not only depicted as an "intellectual" group, but often also as

an “elite” — or even “elitist” — group of highly educated, middle to upper class people. In contrast to that, PATAS is regarded — and regards itself — as more diverse when it comes to its members’ educational and socio-economic background since the organization had been able to attract people also from the working-class or the unemployed, as I was told. While I have not conducted any statistical surveys on the actual financial situation of the groups’ individual members to assess this distinction on a *quantitative* level, it became clear that on a *discursive* level they, indeed, play an important role to distinguish FF and PATAS from one another. Thus, it is not my intention to reify these characterizations nor to rectify them.

Still, as I would argue, the social position(ing) of each group — whether ascribed or actual — corresponds and contributes to a particular form of agency, respectively, which on the other hand pertains as well as becomes manifest in the (changing) focus of their identity strategies. Only through strong personal and institutional connections on certain levels FF might have been able to exert any political influence on a local or national level, especially with regard to reproductive health policies. Humanitarian activities specifically aimed at “the poor,” or “the grassroots,” on the other hand, might allow PATAS not only to challenge stereotypes about the “immorality” of atheists among this particular social stratum, but also become more attractive for potential international support through like-minded organizations.

In the last part of this chapter, I give a contextualization of how and why such socio-economic distinctions between FF and PATAS might have developed in the first place. Therefore, I will describe the related narratives against the background of each group’s initial focus of activity and their specific foundational histories, which in fact are intertwined on various levels.

Hygiene kits, B-52 shots, and raising funds through talking

In order to help the victims of “Yolanda,” PATAS members had decided to do volunteer work instead of holding its monthly meetup at the PATAS HQ in Quezon City. Thus, they participated at the so-called “Oplan Salubong” operation at the Villamor Airbase in Parañaque City, located in the south of Manila. This relief operation — mainly coordinated by the Philippines’ official Department of Social Welfare and Development

(DSWD) — was established to give immediate support to the evacuees, who were flown in from the Visayas region on C-130 aircrafts owned by the Philippine Air Force (PAF). On arrival they were given food and water, received medical care and, if necessary, psychological and emotional support by psychologists and social workers. Further, they were provided with temporary shelter or free transportation, in case they had some relatives or friends in the capital, whom they could stay with.

In the following I will give some ethnographic impressions of my participation in the group's volunteering "meetup" at the airbase:

At "Taft Avenue," the last station of the MRT Line 3 in the southern part of Manila, I get off and take a cab to Villamor Airbase. It is heavy traffic already and we barely get along. I send a SMS to PATAS core member Thomas Fleckner, who is at the airbase already with some of the others. After I finally arrive at the airbase, I have no problems to get in by showing my ID and mentioning that I'm there to do volunteer work with my friends. The guard at the entrance tells me to take the shuttle bus to the "grandstand," where all the activities are centrally organized and where I would meet the others. The small vehicle is crammed with volunteers, mostly young people, probably high school and college students, seemingly excited and eager to help their fellow citizens, who are arriving plane by plane from the typhoon-affected regions. The area around the grandstand is filled with booths, operated by dozens of different groups and organizations. While I walk around the heavily crowded place, looking for the PATAS guys, I suddenly bump into Thomas. He brings me to the others, who are standing around an unloading point, where the group was apparently allowed to hang up a huge poster, on which the group's own logo and the logos of international sponsors like the Atheist Alliance International *(AAI) and the* American Humanist Association *(AHA) are printed. It says: "Help Typhoon Yolanda Survivors." Bill is expected to arrive anytime soon with a small truck that PATAS members had filled up densely with hundreds of hygiene kits before. While I keep on waiting with the ones at the unloading point, some of the other PATAS volunteers are working at one of the small booths, where food kits are collected, sorted and prepared for distribution to the incoming evacuees.*

As I am told, we are supposed to split in groups and go up to the grandstand ourselves in order to help distributing the food kits and water bottles directly to the evacuees, who are scheduled to arrive with another aircraft anytime soon. Several of the PATAS core

members are present, some wearing their white T-Shirts with a print of the group's new eye-catching green logo. However, I also recognize quite a few new faces. We are standing around Cal, whom I had met for the first time at the so-called "PATAS-BATAS Grand Meetup," which the organization's LGBT-wing had organized in September, and who is enthusiastically and vividly talking about some of his personal experiences as a very self-confident nonbeliever.

After a while, the small truck with the hygiene kits arrives. Patrick and another guy, whom I don't really know, sit at the front, Bill jumps out of the back of the truck. We start to unload the big boxes, each of them filled with more than a dozen of small plastic bags. There are separate hygiene kits for males, females, and children, respectively. At first, we carry the boxes to a big stall, where old clothes are collected and sorted out, but then are told to bring them to a small booth outside the stall. Then, finally, it is our turn now to get up on the grandstand in order to replace some of our fellow PATAS volunteers, who had been helping there already for quite some time. New evacuees, as we are told, are expected to arrive anytime soon. Together with nine other PATAS members, I climb up the metal steps up to the grandstand, which is full of people. So-called "food marshals," who are coordinating the different groups of volunteers, immediately give us a short introduction and divide us into smaller groups based on specific tasks. Me and Jonathan, whom I haven't seen at any meetups before and who seems a very young PATAS volunteer, probably not even 18 years old, are responsible for the cleansing of the place after the incoming evacuees will have been finished eating their food boxes. From the grandstand the evacuees are supposed to proceed to the other areas, e.g. the medical care tents or the breastfeeding station etc., depending on their individual needs. Instead of cleaning up the place, Jonathan and I are, however, suddenly more busy with carrying food kits and water bottles from some of the booths around the grandstand up to the place, where they are distributed.

At around 10pm we are finished with our "shift" and are now ready to leave the airbase with the others. First, however, all the group members come together at the unloading spot to hold the PATAS poster up in the air, thereby posing for pictures that I and another guy are taking. As with all of the official group activities, these photos and a short report about the day will later be posted on the official website and on the Facebook forum. Some of the volunteers and I decide to let the night end with dinner and drinks somewhere at Makati's Jupiter Street, which is famous for its bars and restaurants. Thus, I

climb into the back of the small truck together with several other PATAS members. Crammed with tired faces and exhausted bodies on two small benches, the vehicle slowly merges into Manila's Saturday night traffic stream. A slight breeze finds it way through the little sliding windows at the side of the truck, while I exchange a few words in German with Thomas, who is sitting in front of me.

At a restaurant called "Topgrill," we order several dishes for the whole group to share. As always at those PATAS post-meetup gatherings, the atmosphere is very laid-back and informal, and we stay there until late at night. After we had a round of "B52," a special kind of strong alcoholic beverage that I'm supposed to try, we finally call it a day. Sleepy and exhausted, slightly tipsy thanks to the "B52" shots, we leave the restaurant at around 3:30am. On the outside, we say good-bye to each other and Bill and I decide to share a cab heading north, towards Quezon City. During the ride we talk again about the typhoon and the Villamor Airbase activity until Bill has to drop off at a corner, where he can catch a bus that will bring him close to his parents' house. I stay inside the car and ask the driver to take me further north, to the Diliman campus of UP. It's almost 4am now and, in contrast to the traffic snarls that one is confronted with during daytime, the streets are empty. The driver, who seems to have listened to my conversation with Bill before, asks me if I was a volunteer and then tells me that his family is from Tacloban — one of the most affected and devastated cities located on the island of Leyte. His relatives are alive, he says, but he is worried about his wife, who had decided to travel to Leyte on her own in order to look for them and maybe bring them to Manila. The mobile network seems not working properly yet, he tells me in a low voice, while gazing through the windshield. He can't reach her via phone, since four days he hasn't talked to her. His wrinkled, dark-skinned hands are clutched firmly around the steering wheel, while I get off the car.

Figure 31: PATAS members taking a rest during their relief operation at Villamor Airbase in the wake of super typhoon "Yolanda" in November 2013.

Figure 32: PATAS members posing with a poster after the relief operation.

One week before this volunteer "meetup" of PATAS at the Villamor Airbase, I had been able to attend an FF event, which the group's core members had organized also in support of the victims of "Yolanda." However, the activity of FF and the way I participated in it, was — as already pointed out above — quite different. While not less excited about it, for "attending" that event I fortunately did not need to travel across the whole city, exposing myself to the heat and smog of Manila's ever-crowded streets. All I had to do was to stay inside my air-conditioned apartment on the campus of UP, sit down at my kitchen table, turn on my laptop and connect to my guest house's Wi-Fi network. Via Live-Stream I watched Red Tani, the president of FF, interviewing the famous US philosopher — and one of the so-called "Four Horsemen" (see chapter 5) — Daniel Dennett on Skype. The interview was hosted on a digital platform called "Twitch," which allowed people not only to watch the video-stream, but also to log in to a chat-room and simultaneously post messages, i.e. to comment on the ongoing conversation between Red and Dennett while listening to it. They talked about various issues, from "freethinkers" and religious belief to Dennett's upcoming book and atheist

"churches," and even about the newly elected Pope Franics. Red must have been truly proud about this chance to directly talk to Dennett, as one could, indeed, easily notice in his remarks about the event on the very next day at the FF meetup. The interview was the first of a whole series of interviews with scientists, philosophers, and representatives of the transnational "freethinking" movement. All the Skype conversations were recorded, and later put up on the website and the group's YouTube-channel under the motto of "Conversations for a Cause," as part of FF's fundraising campaign for "Yolanda" victims. The interview with Dennett also ended a so-called 18-hour "webathon" that FF members conducted on that day. Hosted in the house of Red, which he shares with some of the FF core members, the show — accessible via live-stream from Saturday, 9am to Sunday, 2am (!) — included, for example, interviews with two more scientists. The webathon was announced as follows: "Participate in discussions, ask questions, play games, and even learn how to make hexaflexagons with fellow freethinkers here and around the world. Warm up your brains for the intelligent ideas and insights you'll gain from the great conversations below." (FF 2013f; see figure 34) The whole event was supposed "to get the freethinking community in the Philippines and in the world to raise funds to support those affected by this horrific tragedy" (ibid.). And it did. As stated on their website, during these two days of fundraising activities, the "webathon" on Saturday and the "Meetup for a Cause" held on Sunday, FF "logged over P60,000 in donations" (FF 2013g) for the *Philippine Red Cross* and its relief operations.

My ethnographic juxtaposition of these two activities — PATAS' volunteerism at the airbase and FF's "webathon" including the interview with Daniel Dennett — is, of course, not to judge, which one has been more effective in actually helping the victims of "Yolanda." Both endeavors, indeed, can be seen as quite successful – each in its own way. What the comparison of both group's reaction to this tragic disaster illustrates quite well, however, is the particular differentiation or distinction between FF and PATAS mentioned above, i.e. that the latter represented, and was more focused on the "grassroots" level, whereas the former was often seen as the more "intellectually" inclined group. While not always expressed exactly in these terms, such a broader characterization of the two organizations *beyond* their positioning towards religion constitutes an important part in the discursive construction of their respective collective identities, not least vis-a-vis each other.

Figure 33: Online advertisement of FF for their fundraising activities in the wake of super typhoon "Yolanda" in November 2013.

This can be seen, for example, with regard to PATAS' "Free Medical Clinic." As described in the previous chapter, this open-air "clinic" was conducted for several months in 2014 in poor neighborhoods, or *barangays*, located outside Metro Manila. Organized under the motto of "Good without God" it included free medical examinations and distribution of medical drugs. Reflecting on the group's activities, Yek Lai Fatt, at the time PATAS' current chairman and the driving force behind the "clinic," emphasized in our interview such a focus on the "grassroots" as an important distinguishing factor between FF and PATAS:

> That's why now, PATAS focuses on the grassroots. Like, for example, you can see, Filipino Freethinkers and PATAS are totally two different organizations. Filipino Freethinkers is focused on the common policy, focused on the common regulation, common law, everything… for us, PATAS, we want to focus on the grassroots, that means we go down to the community to tell people, they [= atheists] are good without God. (Interview with Yek Lai Fatt, PATAS, 2014)

In order to convey their message — that one, indeed, can be a "moral" person without any religious affiliation — more effectively on the "grassroots" level, the group distributed at the first "Free Medical Clinic" in February 2014 copies of their mission and vision statement, partly translated from English to Tagalog. Further, from the start the "clinic" was seen also as an important venue for directly supporting the reproductive health (RH) law described in chapter 4. When I talked with Tess Termulo, PATAS new president, trained medical doctor and a very outspoken RH supporter, about this issue in our interview, I asked her on the group's engagement and about how PATAS would attempt to have any impact in this regard. She told me that besides "trying to raise awareness online about it" through their website articles, "PATAS does not have the political clout yet to have that very significant effect on political groups concerning this reproductive health law." However, as she added later in the conversation, what PATAS members were planning to do in the context of the "Free Medical Clinic," which the group had launched just a week before our interview, was to "incorporate reproductive health teachings to the community, because these are the people who don't really have access to a lot of information. So we're going to bring the information they need there. At least if we can make significant contribution to a small community […], I think that would be a great accomplishment already on the part of the organization" (Interview with Tess Termulo, PATAS, 2014). Two months later, in April 2014 during its third "Free Medical Clinic," only two weeks after the Supreme Court's final decision on the constitutionality of the RH Law in Baguio, PATAS was already able to include such teaching sessions on RH-related issues (see figure 35). After the lecture given by a hired social worker free injectable contraceptives were distributed to interested women living in the neighborhood. (For FF's engagement in the issue of RH, see chapter 4)

Figure 34: A social worker at the PATAS Free Medical Clinic giving a lecture on reproductive health (RH) to local barangay residents.

In contrast to the ascribed "grassroots" focus of PATAS, FF's "intellectual" character, as manifest in their social activism in the wake of Yolanda described before, is attributed to the group in particular with regard to their regular meetups. For instance, in an article on the PATAS website, from which I quoted in the previous chapter, the author Sathepine (2011) — aside from mentioning PATAS' focus on atheism as the distinguishing factor — explicitly referred to FF and "their intellectual discussions." Similarly, another PATAS member, who had attended some FF meetups before, told me that he was not always able to follow the discussions there, because of their highly "intellectual" character. As I told him later on, after I had attended several meetups of FF myself, I could somewhat relate to his assessment of FF's formal gatherings. While the general atmosphere there was very friendly and quite relaxed, the discussions themselves sometimes were, indeed, not always easy to follow. It was, for example, not uncommon to hear certain terms and names being dropped (e.g. Judith Butler, Peter Singer etc.), or sources being cited, some of which I might have recognized only because

of my own educational background in the social sciences. Further, the topics, which were commonly announced a few days prior to the meetups, often reflected current events and recent public debates from the media, so that one also had to be well informed and up-to-date in this regard.

As one FF member told me in an interview, he first was "trying to accumulate confidence" before he went to his first meetup, at which he initially just hid behind his gadget being afraid to get into a conversation with someone, whom he might not be able to "satisfy intellectually." "I was intimidated," he said — and, he still is, as he admitted later on in our conversation, although he would really enjoy the fact that he has been learning "something new at every meetup." When he advertised the group to his friends, some of whom he was trying to convince to join him for the meetups, he noticed that one of the reasons that they had been reluctant to do so was exactly this image of FF being "too intellectual" or "too smart." "Most of my friends think that's it's really intellectual to go to FF," he said and, like other activists whom I had talked to as well, pointed out that in general there was a kind of "anti-intellectual" attitude among Philippine society: "So, it's still a Filipino… eh, tradition, like 'They're too smart, […] it will just stress out my mind!' So maybe some Filipinos are not that intellectual and FF is a really intellectual group, I mean to the max, really intellectual."

FF core members are, of course, aware of the fact that some participants feel, or might feel somewhat "intimidated" by the group's "intellectual discussions" or at least might not be comfortable and confident enough to *actively* engage in them. In this regard, the so-called "raunchy topic of the week," which I described in chapter 3, is quite important, since aside from being a direct expression of FF's general attitude of "sex-positivity" it represents an attempt to loosen up these discussions a bit — an initiative "to keep things light" and to provide "a little fun from all the heavy stuff," as Kenneth put it in our interview. Almost two years later, in 2016, when I went back to the Philippines for a short re-study, I witnessed another such attempt of FF to incorporate "a little fun" in the group's regular meetups. The first FF gathering I was able to attend one day after my arrival in Manila was held in a restaurant called "Dice 'n Dine." As the name of the locale indicates, guests are not only provided with various meals for dinner, but — in an even larger variety — with all kinds of boardgames (see figure 36).

Figure 35: Attendees and FF members playing board games at the FF meetup organized at a restaurant called "Dice 'n Dine."

As Red told me, this new and rather unusual setup for a meetup would make participating much easier for interested people who might otherwise be too "intimidated" by the discussions. A few days after the meetup at "Dice 'n Dine," during our follow-up interview, I asked him again about this issue and he told me:

> Yah, yah… like I've heard a lot of people say that they're intimidated by us, or by the idea of the meetups, you know, like they think it's maybe highfaluuutiiiing, or they think it's academic, or pretentious, or they think that people, maybe they're afraid that people will be as critical of bad ideas, or of mistakes as people are online. People tend to be *very* critical and mean online. Maybe they're afraid of that. (Interview with Red Tani, FF, 2016)

Kenneth similarly referred to this "digital" dimension of FF and the problem of how some people were behaving in the group's online forums: "Even the Facebook group alone got 30,000 LIKES or so, but the UPDATES AND ANNOUNCEMENT page has some of the either dumbest or the most reactionary things on both sides, whether religious or nonreligious." He then went on to reflect:

> There has been actually a lot of discussion on the core group, whether to shut down the Facebook discussion group, just because the quality of the discussions there has been, frankly, quite poor. But then again, (…) that's always been a question like, how-, 'cause FF *is* a group that's funded mostly by like-, it's, that started and run by middle-class Filipinos. So, how elitist do you want to go? Because classism is a serious problem here in the Philippines, right? So, we've always known that our message is for a, a certain group of people, we've been lucky in that we can talk to some of the more influential people, just because we speak in their language. But like, how, how intellectual elitist do you want FF to go? Like, you can shut down that discussion group, but it does ask the same questions, which, like we consider them important questions before, now we consider them stupid questions, because we already discussed them *ad nauseam*, but they keep coming up, 'cause new people are to keep coming in. So, you know, it's a question that we constantly ask ourselves, like, how do you want to balance like quality discussion versus you're going to exclude certain, certain people, and then also how much patience and resources do your moderators have? So, yah… (Interview with Kenneth Keng, FF, 2014)

While the relationship — or, at times, apparent discrepancy — between members' "online" and "offline" behavior would be an interesting question in its own right and merit further discussion, what is important here in Kenneth's comment is the connection of the group's "intellectual" character with the ascribed socio-economic background of its core members and the wider issue of "classism" as such. It is this linkage that I will look at in more detail in the next section.

"We are privileged!" nonbelief and urban milieus

The rising level of alcohol in Jason's blood seems to facilitate his flow of words. A few hours ago, I had attended one of my first FF meetups at the beginning of my ten-month stay in Manila. As it usually happens after the formal discussion meeting has finished, a small group of meetup participants — including one dutiful and curious anthropologist — ended up in a nearby bar to continue the conversations in a more informal context, sometimes until late at night. Jason, normally rather quiet at the meetups, participating in the discussions only now and then, apparently feels more comfortable at these kind of post-meetup gatherings. "We are privileged," he repeats several times, sitting in front of me, right across the table. I had been watching him emptying several bottles of San Miguel *and* Red Horse *beer that night, thus I notice without much surprise that he got slightly*

drunk by now. Reflecting about my research project on "nonreligion in the Philippines," as I had introduced it before, he asserts that I probably wouldn't find any atheists among the less privileged: "You won't find them in Quiapo."[46]

Jason's thoughts about the relation between nonbelief and social class, as solidified in this self-reflective remark that "we," i.e. nonbelievers or members of FF, "are privileged," seemed to confirm my previous assumption about organized atheism and secularism in the Philippines being an "elite" phenomenon. The image of a group of young people living in the capital and meeting in coffee shops in order to talk and discuss about philosophy and politics had led me to this general assumption long before I actually came to Manila myself for fieldwork, just by browsing through some of the group's online stuff. Especially in a country, where — both in rural and urban areas — large parts of the population are struggling with poverty, such an assumption seemed to me more than justified. However, only a few weeks later, the picture got more complicated. After a special meeting of some of the PATAS core members, which I was able to attend, Manuel, a self-declared atheist already in his late forties or early fifties, invited me to join him for a beer at one of his favorite bars:

Manuel seems to be very open about his unbelief. At the last meeting only a week before, I saw him proudly wearing the white PATAS shirt with the official logo printed on the front and one of the group's slogans on the backside. I ask him about it and he tells me that all his friends and his family members knew very well about his atheistic worldview. "But," he adds, while we sit down at one of the small tables outside the bar, "they accept me like I am." Even the young girl who works at the bar, preparing our drinks, seems to know him well. When she comes over and puts two bottles of San Miguel *beer on the table in front of us, he doesn't hesitate to introduce me to her explicitly as a researcher on "atheism" in the Philippines. Contrary to the view of many other Filipino atheists, whom I had met during my research, he considers his fellow citizens as generally "open-minded" in this regard. As he tells me, he even got a priest among his friends. Although his membership and activism in PATAS constituted one of the most important parts of his life, he then emphasizes, while sipping on his* San Miguel, *that "it's not all about atheism." After some time, during which*

[46] Quiapo is considered a rather poor neighborhood in Manila, which is nevertheless very popular and famous, also among tourists, in particular for its church, the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene, or simply the "Quiapo Church."

we were talking a bit more about his experiences and thoughts as a nonbeliever, Manuel points towards several cars parked nearby in front of a fancy-looking restaurant. Seemingly amused, with a small grin on his face, he remarks that those people must be quite wealthy. After a short glimpse at those cars, which I hadn't really noticed before, I instantly agree with him. Then I mention that PATAS members could also be considered "rich," since most of them certainly belonged to the "upper class" as well. However, to my surprise, after I shared my thoughts on these matters, Manuel disagrees quite strongly. According to him, there was, in fact, only one person at PATAS, who could be seen as affluent.

As these ethnographic vignettes from the early stages of my fieldwork indicate, members of FF and PATAS do not only characterize each group by emphasizing their different approaches towards religion, or by drawing on the general distinction introduced above, i.e. the "intellectualism" of the former, and the "grassroots" activism of the latter. They also portray both groups based on the "social class" they represent — or, allegedly represent —, respectively. Through other incidents, conversations, and observations later on in my research, I became more and more aware of the importance of such a "socio-economic mapping."

As, for instance, Yek, told me in our interview over a cup of iced coffee — with a voice swinging back and forth between analytical seriousness and ironic undertones:

> But normally now most of the atheists are the young generation and mostly highly educated peoples […] FF mostly are university students, most of the PATAS members are mostly working, or unemployment, eh… that's why they are always lacking of funds (laughs). (Interview with Yek Lai Fatt, PATAS, 2014)

The PATAS member, who told me about his difficulties in following the "highly intellectual" discussions at the FF meetups, some of which he had attended before, contrasted the experience at FF with his membership in PATAS, where he later became a central figure. PATAS was, as he put it, "for everyone." To illustrate and emphasize what he meant, he told me — similar to Yek — that the group's members would, for example, include also people from the unemployment sector and the working class.

At one meetup of the southern chapter of FF, one attendee articulated the link of the group members' educational background and a certain social milieu similarly to these quotes from members of PATAS. Himself having been a longtime member of FF, he

mentioned that the group is still struggling with its image of being a crowd of "rich students." Thereby, he contrasted the group of FF with PATAS, which in his view somehow managed to cut across different socioeconomic strata with regard to the organization's membership — a fact that he seemingly acknowledged with some admiration. When I was talking to some other FF members of the main chapter in a more informal context, one of them, who knew that I was doing research on both groups, asked me about my own thoughts on the differences between FF and PATAS. While I was sorting my mind, not sure back then what answer to give, another FF member chipped in, stating in a similar, but less diplomatic — though tongue-in-cheek — way that FF was "a bunch of rich kids" talking about philosophy, while the PATAS guys would represent "the poor."

As indicated in these quotes and observations, such characterizations of FF and PATAS based on the specific socio-economic background of their membership and/or the focus of their activities do, of course, embody various judgements and evaluations — and thus, depending on the context, result in different ways of dealing with them, as the following examples will show. In an interview with another FF member who not only had been attending FF meetups for several years, but also sometimes joined the gatherings of PATAS, since — as he told me — he had "friends" there, too, I asked what distinguished the former group from the latter. After a brief moment of silence, he said: "The membership." He then went on to explain what he meant: "PATAS' members are more down-to-earth than FF's." And a few reflections later, he summed it up as follows:

> FF's membership would be from people with better-off than average economic backgrounds than those who come to PATAS. So, that's a distinguishing factor… Does FF — how do you say this? —, does FF intend that? Was that intentionally on FF's part? Of course not! Of course, not… it's just that the core leadership of FF just seems to attract that kind of, those kinds of people while the core leadership of PATAS would attract other kinds of people… so, it's not really intentional.

According to him it was not only unintentional on the part of FF that the group attracted mainly "people with better-off than average economic backgrounds," but — as he further told me — it was also something that the core members would be rather reluctant to admit, or they would just try to downplay the issue.

Another example shows that FF members themselves are very well aware of the group's particular membership composition with regard to their socio-economic

backgrounds. At one meetup Red asked the meetup attendees the so-called "question of the week" (see chapter 3) as part of the introduction round. This time participants were supposed to talk about their "first world problems," i.e. any "luxurious" problems they had to deal with. One member complained, for example, about having too much music for his hard drive's capacity. Prior to another FF meetup I once met Cris — a very enthusiastic attendee — for lunch and shared my thoughts about the topics that had been announced for the discussions on that day. As I told him, they seemed to me rather a bit strange, or "special" this time. He checked the topics on his smartphone, immediately agreed with me, and pointed out tongue-in-cheek that FF would belong to a "specific" social stratum, i.e. the middle- and upper-classes of society. In the interview with the local news station GMA, from which I quoted in chapter 4, the journalist Katrina Stuart Santiago brought up the topic of the particular background of the group's members as well and explicitly confronted her interlocutors Kenneth and Red with her observations in this regard: "But considering the fact that FF is an online venue, we speak in English, social class is an important consideration. How do you navigate this as well?" (Santiago 2012) In his reply, Kenneth mentioned similarly to Cris that "there are some problems we might have that are very particular to our social class."

While these examples indicate FF members' self-awareness — and at times self-ironic handling — of the group's particular image of representing a social and intellectual "elite," I also heard some more critical tones in this regard. At one post-meetup gathering of FF, some members started to reflect on the relation between the socio-economic milieu, the intellectualism, and the activism of the organization. While they seemingly supported and strongly identified with most of the values and socio-political positions of FF as a group — e.g. secularism, reason and science, human and reproductive health rights etc. —, they mentioned that in general there was "too much talking" at FF. "If you really want social change, then talking is not enough," one of them said and claimed that FF members would usually not try to actually do something about certain pressing social issues and problems. Another member chipped in and pointed out the bad urban planning and structural architecture of Manila as such an issue, under which many inhabitants would be suffering a lot every single day when using public transport. The FF core members, he complained, would not do anything about it since in his view they belonged to the upper-class, who could afford, for example, their own cars and thus would not be dependent on using any of those public transport systems.

Another member then added that FF, indeed, would be able to exert real influence on such issues — precisely because of their belonging to this particular stratum of society. Interestingly, this link of the socio-economic background of the (core) members of FF and the capacity for socio-political influence was articulated in a similar, but more "positive" way by a former PATAS member: "Here in the Philippines," he told me, "it is the rich people who set the rules, not the poor." According to him, this was the reason why FF would be so successful. The majority of FF were, as he put it, "rich folks."

Again, FF core members are aware of such characterizations and some critical views based on the privileged position and socio-economic background that is ascribed to the group, as the following quote from my interview with Kenneth illustrates. When I asked him how FF might have changed as a group since the time he had joined, he told me:

> When we were starting, at least when I was, when I joined, because it did then going for a couple of years already… Eh, one of the biggest accusations versus all armchair ethicists… eh, we keep talking about like the right thing to do, but you don't actually do anything […].

He continued to talk about the difficulty of balancing members' different expectations and interests in this regard:

> […] there were a lot of accusations of it being either elitist or ineffectual, like it's all talk and no action, and it's weird, because as time has gone on, then you… then we started getting some members — say after FF became more active with LGBT, freedom of expression, and reproductive health —, then you started getting members saying: Okay, now it's… the group is, it's too much of the activism, like we miss… why can't you just sit down and quietly talk? You know, you're always out there and you're pushing, and you're seem angry and…, you know, so it goes back and forth. (Interview with Kenneth Keng, FF, 2014)

FF's "intellectual" image, however, was not something that was pointed out to me only in negative terms. One activist, who had attended meetups of both groups told me in an interview: "Hm, I don't know, I like the FF crowd better than the PATAS crowd, mostly because the conversations are more interesting, or more intellectual, I guess."

In sum, what becomes clear from the interviews, informal conversations and ethnographic observations presented in this section is that FF as a group represents — or at least seems to be perceived as representing — mainly the young, highly educated, middle- to upper-class spectrum of Manila's society. It is a particular image that the

(core) members of FF are very well aware of. Aside from handling it with some sort of self-reflective irony, they in fact try to contest it now and then — quite similar to their attempts to deconstruct the group's "atheist" image. On the other hand, it might be exactly this particular social and socio-economic position of FF members, especially the core members, that allows FF to undergo the shift — which I have described in chapter 4 — the first place: towards a more NGO-like organization focused on issues of "secularism." While PATAS, in the words of Tess, "does not have the political clout yet," FF is, in fact and in the words of Kenneth, "lucky in that we can talk to some of the more influential people, just because we speak in their language." Put differently, the agency that might come with the social position of FF corresponds to, and supports their shifting identity strategy of normalizing nonreligion through "political" action based on the propagation of secularism.

PATAS' membership, in contrast to FF, seems to be more "diverse" in socio-economical terms. And while this characterization is not always regarded as advantageous ("lack of funds"), some members do not only interpret it in a very positive light, but explicitly use it as an important distinguishing factor ("PATAS is for everyone"). As I would argue, the specific form of agency that the positioning as a "grassroots" organization entails, might help PATAS members to challenge and deconstruct public stereotypes, i.e. to reach their goal of normalizing nonbelief through "cultural" transformation of public views on religion and morality (see introduction and chapter 1). Further, with its "humanist turn" described in chapter 5, the group might be in a better position to attract external funding from like-minded organizations in the US or Europe. Supporting humanitarian activities in a "poor" country deemed to be controlled by religion certainly allows the latter to position themselves as well as their own cause in a good light.

"Grassroots atheism" and "mental masturbation"

As mentioned at the outset, in order to better understand why PATAS is characterized by some local activists as such — as focused more on the "grassroots" and as more „diverse" with regard to its members' socio-economic backgrounds compared to FF — one has to look at the organization's particular foundational history. Especially PATAS'

first official president, John Paraiso, is very significant here. A locally well-known atheist activist for many years and certainly one of the most important figures in the recent history of atheism in the Philippines in general (see chapter 2), John is also one of the founders of PATAS. In a quote of the group's former US-based chairwoman and PATAS co-founder, Marissa Langseth (2011), he is described as follows:

> As the PATAS chairwoman and one of the founders, I see to it that our society is in good hands and in the right direction. […] Our President, John Paraiso, is the original Pinoy Atheist, whom I chose to be with, since he personifies my attitude and character if I were in the Philippines. He is for the masses, for the poor, for the regular Filipino who loves life, freedom and equality.

The reason why John — whom one FF member once called tongue-in-check "the mortal enemy of the elites" — is characterized as such, as "for the masses," or in Tagalog the *masa*, is to be found in his personal story of becoming a nonbeliever. One crucial place on John's "path" to atheism is — literally — Manila's famous "Rizal Park," a huge park dedicated to the national hero José Rizal, who was executed there in 1896. Because of its shape known also as "Luneta," this park is not only an attraction for foreign tourists, but very popular among locals, too. On Saturday and Sunday nights it can get quite crowded, with a lot of groups, couples, or families walking around the park, lying on the grass, watching their children running around and playing, or enjoying, for example, the regular free concerts organized at the open auditorium.

As mentioned in chapter 2, in one area, the so-called "Chess Plaza," you can find from around 8pm onwards people huddled together in small groups listening to some informal discussions and debates that are hold there every weekend. Proponents of different religious traditions or of different strands within one religion, and also some self-proclaimed nonbelievers openly engage with each other's philosophies and worldviews in a mostly friendly, but sometimes quite heated and enthusiastically way, thereby often drawing large crowds of curious bystanders.

It was John, who brought me to the debates several times during my stay in Manila. He had been a frequent visitor there for many years and in earlier times was also very actively engaged in the discussions himself, and thus is well known among the regular debaters. Some PATAS members referred to the park as "the shopping mall for the poor." And on one of my first trips to Luneta, John and some of his friends, who accompanied me, further announced that I would see a different kind of atheism there,

"not the FF type!" Referring to himself and his friends in Luneta, John proudly told me on another visit to Luneta: "We are grassroots atheists!" In an unpublished master thesis, a student at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Genevieve Ruth R. Villamin, who had conducted interviews with several local atheists, wrote about the atheists in Luneta that they were "composed not of Filipino intellectuals, but Filipino atheists who belong in the lower social strata" (2008, 99).

As I got to know later on, many of these atheists who regularly gathered at the Chess Plaza were sometimes also regarded as "practical atheists." Villamin defined the term as "Filipino atheists who normally use pure experience to justify nonbelief" (2008, 33). When I asked John and one of his friends about the meaning of the term, they replied something like: "No books, no Internet, just common sense!" Another friend of John and a former PATAS member, whom I had met in Luneta and who agreed to be interviewed later, told me that "practical atheism" was just like this: "If God is real, let him show himself!" To further explain the term he contrasted it with another type of atheists, whom he called the "intelligent atheists."[47] These kinds of atheists would know, for example, about cosmological arguments, about Christopher Hitchens, about Darwin and so on. According to him, FF members could be considered as such and most of them would belong to the upper class. On the other hand, "practical atheists," whom one could find mainly in Luneta, would, as he said, not know about all those books that the "intelligent atheists" were able to read. In his descriptions, FF is thus not only portrayed as representing a particular social stratum — i.e. the middle and upper classes —, but also as displaying a specific kind of atheism, one that is, as my interlocutor sees it, ultimately based — financially as well as in terms of education and language — on the access to certain resources of knowledge like, for example, books.

In February 2009, a few days after he had attended the very first meetup of FF at a Starbucks coffee shop located inside the upscale shopping mall "Shangri-La," John reflected on this issue in a similar way in one blog post titled "Who Said Freethought is…Free?" He writes:

> Unknown to the participants of the First Filipino Freethinkers Forum that was held last Sunday (February 1) at the Shang, I have to walk from Novaliches, Quezon City all the way to Shangri-La Plaza just to attend it.. That was a four

[47] While my interlocutor, in fact, used the term "intelligent" in our interview, I think that he actually meant "intellectual."

> hour walk non-stop. And the meeting was held in Starbucks – WOAH! And to think of it, my family is quite contented with a Nescafe Coffee Stick. It only cost 2 pesos per stick compare to one order of Starbucks coffee. Is it P175.00 per order? I don't know, I only drink weak coffee.
>
> Majority of the participants were "yuppies" (young professionals), rich kids and what ever…I just assume they're rich. Anybody who can afford a 100 peso coffee must be rich.
>
> So that made me think. Is freethought only for the affluent? Is freethought synonymous with guys who graduated from prestigious schools and universities, to those who are successful in life, for those people with cars and are able to dine on fancy restaurants? Is freethought only a vice of well-off individuals just to exercise their bored minds? How about the poor, the destitute, the miserable and the hopeless, can they afford to be freethinkers? (Paraiso 2009)

In the reminder of the article, John discusses the relation between poverty, religion, and the possibility for "freethinking" in the Philippines, before he concludes:

> Freethought may be expensive but thinking is priceless. It is a matter of cooperation within the Filipino freethinking community to reach to such sad individuals. I believe that social stratification is not a hindrance if the freethinkers' vision also caters love and camaraderie.
>
> As a freethinker my goal must be realistic so I can reach my hand on a different world- the world without luxury, where hopes and false hopes thrive. This is the world of the impoverished where self-pity becomes a thick haze that blocks the vision of progress. Where pragmatism narrows objective world-view, minds are clouded by distrust and apathy and where poverty limits dreams and aspiration.
>
> Unfortunately there are freethinkers that are trapped in this kind of world, and these are the kind of freethinkers I would like to reach out to. (Paraiso 2009)

Thus, as I would argue, the common characterization of PATAS as an organization focused on the "grassroots" and as socio-economically more diverse when compared to FF and its members, has to be seen in the context of those early ambitions of John to bring freethinking and atheism closer to "the world of the impoverished." Later, as the co-founder and first president of PATAS, he and his friends, some of whom John knew from the debates in Luneta and who had joined PATAS as well back then, organized several meetings and activities of the newly formed group inside the park, such as the first atheist "coming out" event (see chapter 3).

Aside from this "rootedness" in Luneta, there is another vivid or, in fact, very *graphic*

example of PATAS' grassroots-orientation: the group's first official logo, designed by John Paraiso himself. As I have described in more detail in chapter 3, the letter "A," which stands for "atheism" and which is taken from the pre-colonial indigenous alphabet *baybayin*, wears the traditional Asian rice hat supposed to symbolize that unbelief was something for "every Filipino." The logo has been changed after some time, but it represented very well the initial focus of PATAS on the "common" people. In fact, in a document titled "The Founding of PATAS," which I was provided with, the author and co-founder of the group, Marissa Langseth, also pointed to the group's name in this regard: "Besides, PATAS is an appealing word to the common people. PATAS is for everyone, especially the marginalized sector of the Philippines" (Langseth n.d.).

The depiction of FF as a kind of "intellectual" group, likewise needs to be seen against the background of the organization's own foundational history, which is — as I described in previous chapters in more detail — both different from, as well as heavily intertwined with the one of PATAS. Before FF got more and more involved in socio-political issues like, for example, the above-mentioned issue of reproductive health (RH), the group's focus had clearly been elsewhere. As Kenneth, a longtime member of FF, told me in an interview:

> Although at the time FF was really mainly just discussions and that appealed to me. So I went to a couple of their meetups and then (…) was still small like maybe 8 or 5 or 8 people meet in like a coffee shop and then just talk out issues and I found it enjoyable. You know it's like a… it was a nice place to indulge in mental masturbation outside of college. (Interview with Kenneth Keng, FF, 2014)

The initial function of the regular meetups, which until today constitute the group's cornerstone, was to bring like-minded people together and to provide them a space for discussions, or in Kenneth's words for "mental masturbation." This is what makes the group still attractive to many members, or potential members.

While Kenneth discovered FF only *after* he had graduated from college, for many members it was *during* their time at college that they have joined the group. Aside from the group's "regional" chapters there are, in fact, several so-called "campus" chapters explicitly catering to university students. Students are a crucial target group for FF, as one can read on the organization's website:

> Filipino Freethinkers understands the importance of universities in the formation of the philosophies and ideologies of the youth, which is why we are excited whenever freethinking students of universities come to us regarding establishing their own Filipino Freethinkers University Chapters. College is hard enough and being the sole doubter of religious dogma in a classroom sure doesn't help. We'd like to fix that and get freethinkers in schools in touch with each other and build their own freethinking communities. (FF n.d.-d)

The very first of such a FF "university" chapter was founded by Garrick Bercero inside the state-run *University of the Philippines* (UP) Diliman, where I was officially affiliated at for the time of my fieldwork. Garrick, who later became one of the group's core members and nowadays is responsible for the coordination of the various FF subchapters, told me in an interview about how and why he had formed the UP chapter back in his student days:

> So I was a Christian in High-school and my friends were largely organized around that, like they were friends from the churches or from Bible study, or whatever… so mostly that was my social circle. And when I got to college I became disillusioned and became an atheist. So, I sort of lost my social support and I wanted to start a group for people who were nonbelievers and I found about FF and a friend of mine got me in touch with them, so I started the first school chapter of FF in UP Diliman. Because there used to be the 'Atheist Circle,' but I guess they grew old and then they didn't pass the torch, so by the time I was in college, they were gone by then. So that's how I got into FF, I started, so I guess I started by starting my own chapter and then, and only then did I become a regular at the meetups that were already ongoing. I started the group of innerness January 2010. So, that's when I started attending the meetups, so that would have been about a full year since they started, like FF as an organization. (Interview with Garrick Bercero, FF, 2014)

FF and its UP chapter organized several activities inside the campus, for instance, the film festival in 2010 (see chapter 4). And even some faculty members of UP supported the group and its activism: Dr. Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, for example, professor at the Department of Women and Development Studies at the College of Social Work and Community Development of UP and director of the UP Center for Women's Studies, who is very well known for her outright support of feminism and the RH Bill gave a talk at the FF Forum (FF 2012a), and was also interviewed in a FF podcast on these issues (FF 2013-h). Dr. Nicole Curato, a former assistant professor at the UP Department of Sociology was featured as well in several FF podcasts (see, for example, FF 2016), and gave a talk on "Religion in Public Life" at one of the FF meetups I was able to attend

during my research (FF 2014). Further, as mentioned in chapter 4, in 2011 Red and Garrick themselves had been invited — already for the second time — to give lectures at the Catholic-run *De La Salle University* (DLSU) in Manila (Tani 2011).

Also at the *Ateneo de Manila University*, the famous Catholic-run university close to UP Diliman, which besides UP, DLSU, and the well-known *University of Santo Tomas* (UST) is considered as one of the country's top universities, a chapter of FF was established. In Los Baños (LB), a municipality in Laguna Province southeast to Metro Manila, activists formed yet another FF campus group at the local branch of UP, the FF-UPLB chapter. At one of the FF MMS group's meetups, the FF-UPLB chapter was pointed out to me as "the most activist" one — and just from the few things I was told and read online, it became clear that its members, indeed, were very enthusiastic about their group and its various activities. In 2012 the group got officially recognized by the UPLB *Office of Student Affairs — Student Organizations and Activities Division* and held its first event on September 4, 2012, "An Introduction to Freethinking" (FF 2012b). Its members also got engaged in several on-campus issues, writing, for example, an open letter to the director of the Office of Student Affairs about the distribution of bibles to UPLB freshmen on a campus tour and similar incidents, which members of FF found "completely unacceptable" within a supposedly "secular institution" (Amparo 2013). It might come as no surprise then that Garrick, who as mentioned before is responsible for the coordination of FF's regional and campus chapters, got quite excited about the FF-UPLB group:

> We have school organizations, the most active being the one in UP Los Baños. That's the most active, they are very active in the student politics, in coordinating with other school organizations, so that's our ideal school chapter. It would be great if everyone else, every other school chapter were like that, involved in the student body. (Interview with Garrick Bercero, FF, 2014)

These examples show that FF is on different levels very well connected to universities and the academe. Garrick, Red, many of the other FF core members, and many of the regular meetup attendees themselves have graduated from, or are still studying at various universities including UP, Ateneo, DLSU or UST. Prestigious institutions like these top universities in Metro Manila are, however, not only known for the very high quality of their scholarship and education, but also for being — e.g. in terms of their tuition fees — among the most expensive ones in the country. Considering that in the

Philippines — as is the case in many other countries — the access to proper (higher) education is largely based on the financial capabilities of the prospective student's family, the image of FF being a crowd of "rich students" becomes more comprehensible.

To conclude this section, however, let me emphasize again that I cannot, and do not want to, provide any assessment — statistically, or otherwise — of the "correctness" of the discursive (and often normative) differentiations between FF and PATAS based on each membership's general socio-economic, their educational background, and their foci of activity. Empirically, of course, such distinctions might never become manifest as clear-cut as they sometimes get articulated. In the past, for example, FF had also organized humanitarian activities similar to the ones of PATAS, and their engagement in the debate on reproductive health policies — in form of protest rallies etc. — could easily be regarded as "grassroots" activism as well. On the other hand, PATAS has, of course, also members with an academic background, such as the group's president Tess Termulo herself, and the monthly meetups at the PATAS HQ featured "intellectual" lectures and discussions as well (see chapter 3). What my exploration of the two groups' "rootedness" in different milieus, as well as both group's initial purposes has thrown light on, however, is how and why such distinctions might have developed in the first place. The "historical" and "geographical" (i.e. Rizal Park versus Manila's top universities) contextualization of such specific characterizations and representations of FF and PATAS — not least vis-a-vis each other — further underlines the need to look *beyond* both organizations' positioning on religion, and their particular relations with the local religious context, when analyzing and describing their respective collective identity, or overall identity strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up: the particular form of the activism of FF and PATAS, as portrayed at the beginning of this chapter, reflects important differences between them, not only in terms of the specific target group or recipients, but also with regard to the respective socio-economic strata each group's members themselves represent, or allegedly represent. PATAS' "grassroots" activism — as seen both in its "Yolanda" relief operation

and its "Free Medical Clinic" — is directed mainly towards the "common" people, or as it is called in Tagalog, the *masa*. That's where members of the group apparently want to spread their ideas and try to counter perceived misconceptions about atheism, particularly by emphasizing and demonstrating that one can be "good without God." It is also where some of its members, especially in the early phase of the group's existence, came from. PATAS thus seems to represent a more diverse membership in socioeconomic terms, and is, as I have shown, characterized as such by members and non-members alike. The online fundraising campaign of FF in the wake of the typhoon, conversely, was first and foremost directed towards the group members' "peers," who consist, or are perceived to consist, mainly of university educated people from the middle- and upper-class interested in "intellectual" issues and discussions — and, one might add, who are financially capable to donate. It is the various links of FF to the academe — i.e. biographically, ideologically, or institutionally —, which I have pointed out above, as well as the strong relation between education and personal socio-economic resources that have certainly fostered this image of FF being a group of "rich students."

The particular forms and foci of the social activism, in which both groups besides their regular meetups frequently engage, and the related "socio-economic mapping" thus illustrate and indicate some important differences and differentiations between FF and PATAS that go *beyond* their immediate stance on religion. Both groups thus have to be seen as strongly embedded in various other relations, i.e. aside from those to the religious context, in particular the relationship towards each other. As secularist groups located in Manila, with similar goals and as catering to the same potential membership, such relations and corresponding discursive distinctions are an important element in their respective collective identity as well.

Further, what also becomes manifest in the different social positions that FF and PATAS seem to embody are what Rinaldo called — in her study of women's activists in Indonesia, which I mentioned in the thesis' introduction — different "modes of (…) agency and activism" (2013, 23). In the Philippines as elsewhere, a higher socio-economic status and educational level may lead to a higher capacity for political influence, or, in the words of the above-quoted activist: "Here in the Philippines it is the rich people who set the rules, not the poor." The ascribed or actual social positioning of FF might thus result in a particular form of agency that enables the group to pursue its

efforts of becoming a more political and influential NGO-like organization focused mainly on issues of secularism and human rights. The successful involvement in the debate on RH policies constitutes a case in point in this regard. For PATAS, on the other hand, positioning as a "grassroots" organization and as being more focused on the *masa*, i.e. through humanitarian activities in local communities, might likewise correspond better to its distinct and changing identity strategy of deconstructing public and "cultural" stereotypes related to religion and morality. As would argue, this strategy together with the group's strong international links to like-minded organizations especially in Western contexts, reveals a different form of agency.

Conclusion

Shifting Relations, Productive Tensions

In June 2012 a young Indonesian man called Alexander Aan living in West Sumatra was sentenced to jail for more than two years. On Facebook he had criticized Islam and declared himself an atheist, for which he was attacked by a Muslim mob, and eventually got arrested. The Indonesian state ideology called *Pancasilla* prescribes every citizen to officially profess one of the great religious traditions, such as Islam or Christianity. Atheism as an option is not available. Aan's publicly declared unbelief was thus regarded a threat to social peace and order, and he was found guilty of insulting religion, i.e. blasphemy.

In the Philippines, both groups, the *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF) and the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS), on which I have conducted my research, had posted official statements on the case of Alexander Aan, invoking international solidarity. Further, three representatives of a group called *Indonesian Atheists* (IA) participated at the Humanist Conference organized by PATAS in Cebu City in 2013, which I was able to attend. They gave a talk about the enormous difficulties they had to face as nonbelievers in Indonesia. In contrast to the Philippines, they could, for example, not officially announce their own regular gatherings as meetups for atheists, but only organize them secretly.

In June 2015, both the president of FF, Red Tani, and the president of PATAS, Tess Termulo, went to Singapore in order to attend the "Asian Humanism Conference — Unity in Diversity" organized by the local *Humanist Society Singapore*. Afterwards, in an interview with the president of the latter, Paul Tobin, Red asked him about the challenges of organizing such an event. Paul replied:

> […] I guess the challenge is Singapore officially is a secular country, so that is why it is easier for us than say our neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia to set up a humanist society. But at the same time, the Singapore government is acutely aware of racial and religious sensitivities. Now whether one agrees with it or not, one has to work within that legal framework. One of the issues we had was initially we wanted to make this actually an open event which basically means we can invite members of the public to come to our place. Unfortunately we were not able to get the necessary papers for us to do that. Hence, we had to do it in such a way that only members are allowed to attend. So that is some of the difficulties we face. They are obviously not as bad as what other atheists, humanists and non-believers face all over this region. But this are the realities we have to live under, there are certain restrictions that we have to work around some times. (Paul Tobin in Humanist Society Singapore 2015)

The differences pointed out in this quote about the situation of organized humanists in Singapore, and apparent also in the case of the Indonesian atheists, indicates not only the organizational variety of secular activists in Southeast Asia, but also the diversity of cultural contexts in which nonbelievers within this region are situated. What does it mean, one might ask, to be an atheist activist, secularist, or humanist in such countries — or, in the neighboring nations of Malaysia, where Islam is the official religion, or the socialist republic of Vietnam, where, on the other hand, nonreligion is supposed to be the norm?

While the social scientific research on organized secularism in varied social contexts around the world has been growing in recent years, most studies are still centered on North American and European countries (see, for example, Cimino and Smith 2014; Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017; LeDrew 2016; Mastiaux 2013). As LeDrew has put it in his study on atheism and activism in the US and Canada, however, we also need to look beyond these contexts since the "atheist movement more broadly (…) is bound to develop different goals, strategies, and identities in other contexts, as it responds to specific social, cultural, and political situations" (2013a, 211).

Based on ten months of ethnographic research in the Philippines, my study on the collective identities of FF and PATAS — at the time of my fieldwork in 2013 and 2014 the two most active forms of organized secularism in the country's capital Manila — contributes to our understanding of organized secularism in such non-Western contexts. I focused on their shifting (strategic) positioning towards religion — which lies at the core of their respective identities as freethinking and atheist groups —, and the differences and similarities between them in this regard. Situated in, and related to

the particular local religious context of the Philippines, which is strongly dominated by Catholicism — and by what has been described as the "People Power Church" (Bautista 2010b) —, both groups aim for the "normalization" of their members' identities as atheists and nonbelievers (cf. Cragun and Manning 2017).

What my above-mentioned remarks about FF' and PATAS' engagement with Indonesian atheists and Singaporean humanists, however, also illustrate is the *transnational* dimension of organized secularism. Both groups are connected not only with like-minded organizations situated within the region of Southeast Asia, however, but also with organizations in other contexts around the world, especially North America and Europe. The collective identities of FF and PATAS thus have to be seen not only as deeply embedded in culture-specific relations towards other local groups, the particular religious context, and Philippine politics and society, but also as situated between the various discourses, debates, and actors that shape and constitute the almost "global" secular movement and its networks.

As I have shown in chapter 1, also on an individual level one can see how cultural particularities and "global" discourses become manifest in complex ways in the narratives of Filipino atheists. Nonbelievers in the Philippines clearly constitute a social minority vis-a-vis a religious, or Catholic majority, and see themselves confronted with marginalization, stigmatization, or even discrimination. Their individual trajectories to nonbelief, and the personal experiences they went through as atheists in such a context vary to a large extent. Most members of FF, PATAS, or similar groups, however, commonly reported about how they felt "alone" and misunderstood within this particular religious environment. This is one of the main reasons why they eventually started to explicitly look for "like-minded" people. Atheist and secular organizations provide their members a "community," i.e. a social platform for exchanging ideas and sharing experiences with such "like-minded" persons. To many activists these groups thus mean a form of personal "empowerment" and also constitute a public, or even political "voice." This dimension — what LeDrew called "the social movement aspects of atheism" (2013, 433) — illustrates the need to take the *individual* identity construction processes of such "active atheists" (cf. Cimino and Smith 2014, 8; LeDrew 2013, 435) as deeply intertwined with, and shaped by the *collective* identity (strategies) of the secularist organizations that they have joined. As I have described, as well as in some other parts of my thesis, in both the individual narratives of Filipino nonbelievers as

well as in the collective discourses of FF and PATAS *transnational* slogans of the aforementioned "global" secular movement are enthusiastically appropriated, such as the process of "coming out" as an atheist, or the motto of "Good without God," and the so-called "new atheism."

In chapter 2, I introduced some of the forerunners of the two groups. While most of them targeted the dominance of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, and took up local issues related to secularism, their identities as atheist or secularist groups as such showed the strong influence of their transnational outlook and international institutional connections as well. Some of them even were explicitly established as Philippine branches of secularist organizations based abroad, e.g. the *Bertrand Russell Society Philippines*, and the *Center for Inquiry Philippines*. Chapter 3, in which I sketched out their organizational profiles in more detail, further indicated this conglomerate of local and transnational dimensions also for FF and PATAS.

In their collective efforts of achieving their main goal of "normalizing" nonbelief (cf. Cragun and Manning 2017), FF and PATAS are constantly shifting between different (identity) strategies, and thus in their respective positioning towards the local religious context. In chapters 4 and 5, I have discussed some of the related tensions, debates, and longterm changes in this regard, which both groups have gone through since their foundations. FF's stance on religion, for example, was shaped by a certain ambivalence from the beginning since it positioned itself as a group mainly for atheists, but at the same time as one being "inclusive" with regard to religious members as well. The organization, however, has begun to put more emphasis on socio-political issues related to the separation between religion and politics under the banner of "secularism" — instead of focusing too much on the question about its own overall stance on religion as such. This became particularly clear in my discussion of FF's engagement in the debate on reproductive health (RH) policies, which have been blocked for more than a decade mainly by the Catholic Church and some of its allies. Its successful campaigning for RH rights constituted a central element in the collective identity construction process of FF as a secularist group. The increasing focus on such political activism, however, has not been uncontested among the group's members. As I have shown, some members have not much interest in becoming involved in those issues at all, they rather prefer that FF largely remains what it had been in the beginning: a social space where nonbelievers simply could meet and talk freely to each other about various topics, some of which are

considered taboo in other contexts, in particular the criticism of religion, or also sexuality. In the words of Cragun and Manning, the meetups organized by FF have provided, and still provide the mostly nonreligious participants a platform "to be openly and safely secular" (2017, 3). With this ever-contested nature of the organization's relation towards religion in mind, I have described FF's shift in this regard as a "normative change," triggered by different "internal factors" and dynamics, as well as by the group's external relations with like-minded groups such as PATAS, or some "wider societal tendencies" such as the aforementioned debate on RH politics (Müller 2015, 339). By drawing further on Stephen LeDrew's analytical distinction between "cultural" and "political" dimensions of the secular movement, I have argued that FF's change can be conceptualized as a broader — albeit not complete or encompassing — shift from the former to the latter, i.e. from an identity (strategy) based mainly on the minority status of its atheist members towards a focus on "political goals of (…) functional differentiation of religious and public sphere, and civil rights for atheists" (LeDrew 2016, 116-17).

In contrast to that, as I have argued in chapter 5, the collective relation with religion of PATAS largely has remained — in the sense of LeDrews framework — within the realm of a "cultural" movement, while it nevertheless has been shifting as well on certain levels. Triggered by some important internal, organizational changes, as well as by established and prospective international cooperative relationships with secularist groups such as the *German Humanist Association* (HVD), or the umbrella organization *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU), PATAS has undergone what I have called a "humanist turn." While the group's initial identity was largely based on its strong focus on, and propagation of "atheism" — to such an extent that among some local activists it has even gained the image of being a group of so-called "militant" atheists —, its members have recently shifted their focus on humanitarian activities under the banner of "humanism," thereby drawing on the aforementioned motto of "Good without God," which is used by like-minded organizations around the world. This became particularly manifest in the "Free Medical Clinic" that PATAS has organized several times in 2014 in poor neighborhoods outside Metro Manila. As in the case of FF's shift towards "secularism," this shift of PATAS towards "humanism" has, however, not remained uncontested, nor has it been all-encompassing. According to some members simply doing "good" did not bring the group any further towards achieving

what they regarded as PATAS' initial and most important goal: the spreading of both atheism, and information about atheism among Philippine society, i.e. to contribute to the "normalization" of atheist identities. Against the background of the country's particularly shaped cultural context as one dominated by religion and religious values, those who were in favor of a less "confrontational," humanist approach — which is supposed to proof their fellow citizens that one can indeed be and do "good without God" — saw it, however, as the more appropriate and promising way of reaching this goal. As I have argued, the debates about these different strategies of trying to normalize nonreligion reflect certain tensions that characterize the larger transnational secular movement, in particular the current dynamics between the so-called "new atheists" and "secular humanists" (cf. LeDrew 2015, 2016). PATAS' "normative change" from a collective identity (strategy) based on the minority discourse of being atheists in a religious, or Catholic society towards an identity based on providing the group's members a kind of "moral validation" (LeDrew 2016, 131) by showing other people their capability of behaving "morally" as such, can be seen as a shift of focus from "constructing and defending shared identities" towards "ideological action aimed at society with the goal of transforming beliefs and values" (112). According to LeDrew's conceptualization, it is these two dimensions that characterize a "cultural" movement, and as such PATAS — while the group does, of course, officially support "secularism" as well — can be seen as less "political" when compared to FF.

While the relation of FF and PATAS towards religion, in particular their respective positioning vis-a-vis the local religious context, lies at the core of their collective identities as contemporary secularist organizations in the Philippines, my research has shown that there are other aspects that members of both groups have emphasized in order to distinguish the two from each other. In chapter 6 I have drawn on the term of "socio-economic mapping" — used by Katharine Wiegele (2005, 80) in her study of the Philippine-based Catholic Charismatic movement *El Shaddai* — to describe some of these dimensions of the respective identity constructions of FF and PATAS *beyond* their immediate religion-relatedness. FF was sometimes depicted as a group of well-educated, intellectually-inclined people coming from the middle-, or upper-classes. PATAS — having, for example, unemployed members and members from the working class — was characterized as socio-economically more diverse, and with regard to their ideological and social activities as focused more on the "grassroots" of Philippine

society. While I did not provide any *quantitative* data on the actual socio-economical backgrounds of FF and PATAS members to evaluate this distinction on an empirical level, it nevertheless became clear in chapter 6 that *discursively* it serves, indeed, as an important distinguishing factor. In order to contextualize those characterizations of FF and PATAS, I looked at each organization's foundational history, its initial main functions and foci of activity. My juxtaposition of PATAS' "roots" in Rizal Park, or Luneta, where one can meet mainly "practical" atheists who belong to the "common" people, or the *masa*, with FF's strong connection to the top universities in Manila, such as Ateneo, UP, or De La Salle, and their academic and intellectual circles, illustrated where such discursive distinctions might have come from. Aside from those elements in their collective identities more specifically related to religion, such discursive distinctions and dynamics between individual secularist groups have to be taken into account when we want to understand the internal (organizational) diversity of the larger secular movement as it becomes manifest both within and outside the Philippines.

Further, as I have argued with reference to Rinaldo's study on women rights activists in Indonesia (2013), the differentiation between FF and PATAS described in chapter 6 with regard to their "roots," their ascribed or actual socio-economic position, and their forms of social activism entail particular "types," or "modes" of agency that correspond to each group's collective identity (strategy). Positioning, and being positioned as an "intellectual" group of highly educated, socio-economically strong, young people in the urban context of Manila certainly helps FF in its efforts of becoming a more political influential, NGO-like organization. PATAS' position(ing) as a "grassroots" movement focused on, as well as drawing members from the urban *masa*, on the other hand, allows the group to successfully conduct its humanitarian activities in local communities, where members want to challenge public stereotypes about the "immorality" of nonbelievers. This collective identity (strategy) of PATAS might also support the group in its attempts of attracting external funding from like-minded organizations overseas, insofar as the possibility of helping "the poor" in the Philippines enables the latter to put their own agendas in a "good" public light. The different forms of agency that come from their different social positioning, or which are, in the words of Rinaldo, linked to "specific social and organizational *milieus*" (2013, 25; original emphasis) allows both groups FF and PATAS to pursue their common goal of

"normalizing" nonreligion and nonbelief in a religion-dominated society through different collective identity strategies.

The complementary potential of studying the secular movement in the Philippines

Thus, and in sum, as my ethnographic analysis of the positions and identity strategies of FF and PATAS has shown, these groups have to be seen as embedded in a whole web of different relations, not only towards each other, but also to other like-minded groups, past and present, in- and outside the Philippines, as well as to the local religious and cultural context. What such a *relational* approach (cf. Campbell 1971; Lee 2012; Quack 2014) also brings to the fore is the complementary potential of studying these specific forms of *non*religion for understanding the dynamics of *religion* in the respective context (cf. Quack 2014). For instance, Jayeel Cornelio (2013) has recently called for a more ethnographic approach towards the issue of secularism and "religious freedom" in the Philippines in order to complement the existing literature, which so far has focused mainly on the legal and institutional dimension of religion and politics. In my thesis I followed his suggestion to take the controversy over reproductive health (RH) policies as a potential and especially interesting research area for exploring "local views and everyday experience of religious freedom in the context of the Philippines" (43-44). What became clear thereby is that we should include not only perspectives from people with various religious affiliations, as he had proposed, but to look also at those explicitly denying any such affiliation. Despite their (statistical) minority status in the country, my analysis of self-declared nonbelievers' and secular activists' views on "religious freedom" and their collective struggle for "secularism" showed how they might contribute to larger changes in the contemporary religious landscape, insofar as members of FF, PATAS, and the like, brought their own imaginations of morality, social life, and modernity into public discourse, and thus enforced other actors involved in the debate on RH — particularly the Catholic Church — to engage with, and react to them.

"What would you like to see us advocate next?" Red asked the attendees at the FF meetup that took place only a couple of days after the decision of the Supreme Court in Baguio City, which I have described in chapter 4. Maybe FF should now tackle "divorce" since it represented the first letter of the so-called DEATH bills, he suggested, only half tongue-in-check. The acronym stands for "divorce," "euthanasia," "abortion," "total

population control" or "transsexuality," and "homosexuality" (cf. Bautista 2010b, 37; Natividad 2012, 35). And though Red called the topic of "abortion" a "slippery slope," which in the Philippines was still considered an absolute taboo, FF had, in fact, already started to discuss it at previous meetups. One FF member, whom I asked about this issue in an interview, told me:

> I personally am for abortion, a lot of FF members are for abortion, but I will, I would believe that, I mean I understand if some members are against it… we don't look for a consensus, we look for arguments, and if an argument is logical, then we really should get behind it, and abortion right now, even though we cannot, I'm not sure if we, if we really *can* get behind abortion as a consensu- eh, eh, ehm, officially, eh, FF, but what we are definitely behind is being able to freely discuss it, because we can only come up to a conclusion, or find a stance, if we are free to discuss abortion, and the Catholic Church isn't even allowing the discussion of abortion, totally, that's, that's how they stop people from thinking, like even thinking about this is illegal, like I, I heard that the one unforgivable sin in, in Catholic dogma is doubting the Holy Spirit, it's not even *not* believing in the Holy Spirit, it's not even like saying bad things about the Holy Spirit, it's *doubting*, merely thinking about the possibility that the Holy Spirit might not be real… so, that's a thought-crime, I mean, making your thoughts a crime is very, very wrong, so not being able to discuss abortion is, is, well, it's a very bad place to be, if you can't even discuss something, anything, and what FF is about is freedom of discussion… (Interview with FF member, 2014)

The debate on RH could thus turn out to have been only the starting point for a whole lot of further issues, in which the Catholic Church might be questioned for its official positions. This underlines the contested nature of the dominance of the Catholic Church, and in particular the discursive conflation of "Catholic" and "Filipino" identity and values (see, for example, Natividad 2012). In this respect, my research on organized secularism can complement the research on the contemporary dynamics of religion in the Philippines, as it is currently undertaken, for example, by the interdisciplinary and transnational research network on "New Perspectives on Religion in the Philippines" (NPRP), of which I am also a part.[48]

[48] The NPRP research group is organized mainly by Adrian Hermann, Deirdre de la Cruz, and Giovanni Maltese. It started as a five-year seminar at the Annual Meetings of the *American Academy of Religion* (AAR) and brings together scholars of different national and disciplinary backgrounds with the aim of publishing an edited volume on the historical and contemporary diversity of religion in the Philippines. See http://www.nprp.net.

Places and spaces of organized secularism and atheist activism in an urban context

During my research stay I went to various places where I encountered different "nonreligious spaces" within the urban context of Metro Manila, which I have introduced in chapter 1 as being full of religious symbols and regular public (mass) expressions of religiosity. These places, where atheists and secular activists come together and collectively create an environment — or "safe" space — in which they can freely articulate their identity as such, included a bookshop, a public park, university campuses, various coffee shops and restaurants, the PATAS HQ, and even a church. Then there is, of course, also the Internet, which provides nonbelievers not only a kind of anonymous space, where they can, for example, publish their thoughts and engage in discussion groups, but also a transnational space that connects them with like-minded people and organizations in other parts of the world, as well as "global" discourses such as the ones mentioned above.

Approaches focusing on issues of place, space, identity, and power have become very common in the study of religion within recent years, to a point that scholars now speak even of an entire "turn" within the humanities and social sciences, i.e. the *spatial turn*. By applying them to a variety of empirical cases, authors have shown the theoretical fruitfulness of spatial approaches, such as the one outlined and propagated by Kim Knott (see, for example, 2005). While Knott herself has focused on the relation of religion and the secular in her studies (see, for example, Knott and Franks 2007), there is still a lot to be explored with a spatial analysis of more explicit forms of nonreligious expressions, e.g. secularist, humanist, and atheist activism (see Aston 2012 for some initial thoughts in this regard).

Such a perspective might shed light on, underline, or put into question some of the issues I pointed out in the previous chapters with reference to my own research in the Philippines. The "spatially articulated class and status stratification" to be found in Manila as "a city of walls" (Tremlett 2014, 538), [49]for instance, becomes visible also with regard to nonbelievers of various backgrounds and their specific identities and kinds of atheism, which they articulate at very different places and spaces there. How is this diversity of secularist expression and nonreligiosity interrelated with the above-

[49] As manifest, for example, in the numerous "gated communities" that can be found all over the metropolis.

mentioned forms of agency and, on the other hand, based on specific socio-economic factors *in other cultural contexts*?

Potential directions for future research

In the remaining part of this conclusion I want to briefly point out a few more possibilities and open questions for further research in relation to my own study: (1) aside from the "active" atheists or secular activists whom I have focused on in this thesis, it would be very interesting to complement their views and practices with nonbelievers who are *not* in any way connected to secularist organizations such as FF or PATAS. A member of FF once said that when he was talking with some friends about why they did not want to participate in the group, they replied to him something like: "Why should I join an organization? I just left the Church!" How do such "non-affiliated" nonbelievers in the Philippines deal with their nonbelief, e.g. when asked to participate in religious events, such as weddings, Christmas etc.?

(2) Some of the secular activists I spoke to during my stay in Manila had children. They told me about some of their worries and difficulties they as atheist parents were confronted with in the religious-dominated cultural context of the Philippines. This included not only personal issues, e.g. how to talk with their children about religious topics, or conflicts with the grandparents about "properly" raising a child, but in particular questions regarding formal education. As mentioned at different points in my thesis, the majority of schools and colleges in the country are run by religious institutions, specifically Catholic ones. Compared to public, i.e. state-run schools, they often can provide better education, not least because of their access to more resources and funds, which left the atheist parents I spoke to in a quite serious dilemma.

(3) With regard to the relation of religion and education, there are further interesting issues to be explored in future research endeavors. In particular, within the specific setting of universities — both those run privately as well as state and secular ones such as UP — one could analyze how, for example, the complex relationship of religion and science in its various dimensions (cf. Dixon 2008) is handled, debated, and articulated by scholars and students, in class and elsewhere. Further, a closer look at the discussions about secularism and public events, some of which I pointed out in chapter 2 — e.g. the question of church buildings inside the campus of UP, or whether or not

prayers should be allowed at official celebrations etc. —, could yield important insights into the aforementioned topic of "religious freedom" in specific contexts. A spatial methodology as pointed out above might be helpful in this regard, since such approaches are "particularly suited to examining places as sites of contestation — and thus for controversies regarding the religious and the secular" (Knott and Franks 2007, 226).

(4) Another issue which I came across while reading on UP and its image of being an activist, left-leaning university, particularly during the time of "martial law," is the relationship between atheism, religion and the Philippine Left. (cf. Villamin 2008) The leftist movement, and its various manifestations, have a long and tumultuous history in the country (see, for example, Fuller 2007, 2011; Saulo 1990; Weekley 2001). However, as one activist whom I talked to about this issue saw it, they apparently preferred to leave the question of religion mostly untouched. Still, in some written memoirs of former leftists I, indeed, did find some intriguing quotes in this regard. Robert Francis "Bobby" B. Garcia, who had joined "the armed movement in the countryside" (2001, 135), for instance, writes in his "To Suffer Thy Comrades" under the section "Rediscovering Lost Faith": "In short, while many revolutionaries relinquished religious faith completely, some preserved it and saw no contradiction" (59). Dr. Jesus B. Lava, another former activist, tells the reader of his "Memoirs of a Communist" in a short section titled "Catholic religiosity and secular science" about how he did "step from religiosity to agnosticism" (2002, 35). Later, however, he published a pamphlet on "Socialism, Communism and Religion," in which he argued for "the convergence of the goals of religion and communism" (360).

Thus, there might, in fact, be a lot more to discover through historical research, probably mainly in form of discourse and textual analysis, but maybe also through oral history approaches. Further, as Kuhn (2018) recently has argued, the "anarchist" movement seems quite strong in *contemporary* Philippines. And, indeed, some of the atheists and secular activists I spoke to explicitly had, or probably would have subscribed to this particular political philosophy. Considering one of the latter's core slogans — "No Gods, No Masters" —, the potential connections and interrelations between discourses and positions of members of the "anarchist" and the "secular" movement might constitute another interesting field of inquiry.

As these short remarks about open questions and further issues indicate, the topic of organized secularism — as well as other forms of nonreligion — in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries should be considered an important venue for future social scientific research to explore a large variety of fascinating themes related to it. Aside from my more direct contributions to the research field on organized secularism in different cultural contexts around the world as pointed out above, it is in this sense that I hope my thesis might also provide a promising entry point.

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